

# CHRISTIAN ATHEISM?

A sermon preached at  
Plymouth Congregational Church  
1900 Nicollet Avenue  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

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**Text: Acts 17:16–28**

A preacher might best own up to his or her insecurities from time to time, and a dream I had a couple of weeks ago gives me an occasion to do just that. In the dream, I wake up in a hotel room of a distant city. I realize that it is Sunday morning, and I have been invited to preach at a very prestigious church in that city. I panic for a second, wondering if I have a sermon, but when I look in my briefcase, there it is, all typed out and ready to go. I read over it and feel pretty good about it. I glance at the clock, hoping I'm on time, and sure enough, there's plenty of time to get to the church. So I go over to my suitcase to get my suit and robe, but when I open the luggage, there's only one thing in there: a clown suit.

The fact is, if you're going to wear the robe and enter the pulpit week after week, you just have to get over taking yourself very seriously. Preaching is like standing on tiptoe to try to reach the moon; given what you're trying to do, even the best effort is bound to fail...and that, by a long shot. So you simply have to accept that there is a vaguely comic aspect to it all. And believe it or not, most of us who stand up here are aware of this before we ever utter a word. It's not that we don't take the *task* seriously; we do. *I* do. Few things are as important to me. And it's not that we don't take the congregation seriously. We certainly do that. But, as a preacher, unless you know that there is a clownish absurdity to the idea that you, of all people, are the one standing in the pulpit, you're lost. In the dream, my unconscious was reminding me of that fact, and I can assure you that it is a lesson heartily understood.

One other note before the sermon. It's Pride Sunday, so a brief comment is in order to our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members and those who love them, which, given the demands of the Gospel, to say nothing of the inclination of our hearts, must include every one of us. Two weeks ago I spoke about the imperative of equal marriage rights, a cause whose successful achievement is, I believe, as inevitable as the sun, but whose progress inches above the political horizon at a pace that is agonizingly slow. The skillful prosecution of a legal case against California's Proposition 8, together with the defense's inability to produce creditable witnesses, let alone creditable ideas, shows some promise, and it is helpful to remember that it was courageous judges, more than visionary legislators, who gave the civil rights movement the energy it needed at critical junctures. There is promise, too, in the apparent demise of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," which was as convoluted and cynical a policy as I can think of. But we have a long way to go. And this church, this congregation, for whom the abolition of slavery was a central tenet in our founding years, has, in these latter days, a new calling, a vocation, a holy mandate to speak out about and to demonstrate the truth of a common dignity that is the birthright of all persons. We will not

shirk this calling, nor doubt it, nor run from it. So, if you can, go to the parade today. Go as a member of Plymouth Church. Go as a person of faith—not the kind that uses religion to exclude and condemn—but as a person of faith who is joyfully confident that genuine love, in all of its many forms, is to be honored, and respected, and blessed.

Will you pray with me?

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.*

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I suppose that there is something telling about beginning a sermon on Christian atheism with a prayer...a kind of tipping of the hand, a showing of one's colors. After all, if I were really going to suggest that there is no God it would be rather strange to start off by praying to him...or her. So, if the title of the sermon has you on edge—either the edge of hopeful anticipation or the edge of nervous concern—I invite you to relax. No gratuitous iconoclasm here; no big surprises. That said, I know that because you are thoughtful people, and because it is in the nature of this church to encourage difficult questioning, there is in many of you a simmering challenge to traditional ideas about God. And for some of you, particularly if you are in a moment of personal crisis or of spontaneous insight, that simmering may have built to a rapid boil. You stand at the head of a grave, or over the wreckage of a relationship, or in the half-light of the loneliness about which I spoke two weeks ago, and the questions rise like steam, hot and amorphous and insinuating themselves into every moment of your life. Is there a God? What can it mean to speak of God at a time like this? Where is God?

When Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, returned from orbiting the earth, he is said to have reported that he saw no God out there. In fact, it was Nikita Khrushchev who made that comment, not Gagarin, and one should note that the cosmonaut himself was a believer who had been baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church and who supported the church in the last years of his life. In any case, it hardly matters who made the statement. By 1961, when human beings pierced the skin of space, the idea of a God who lived “out there” somewhere had already buckled in on itself. No one, whether believer or not, was too surprised or too worried about what the cosmonaut did or didn't see. If God existed at all, we had already gotten used to the idea that he (it was definitely “he” back then) wasn't sitting somewhere up in the sky.

For that matter, in those years of the fifties and sixties—actually for several generations—it was widely questioned whether we *needed* God any more. The common prediction was that humankind was entering a fully secularized time in which religion would first lose its power and then slowly fade into oblivion, a relic of humanity's primitive childhood. What is truly remarkable is that this argument, then and now, often rests on the assumption that the human race has “grown up” or reached a “maturity” that renders God unnecessary. We have, according to this line of thinking, “outgrown” God, the way one “outgrows” Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. You know, I can think of lots of adjectives to describe the human race today, but “mature” is hardly one of them. I might say that our global behavior is more like that of an adolescent, but that would be an affront to adolescents everywhere, many of whom exhibit far more wisdom and restraint than our world leaders, our governments, and the race in general. Here we are, irretrievably fouling our own nest, petulantly fighting one another without surcease, blindly enamored of our technological toys, and we imagine ourselves mature? I think not. You can suggest that God is dead, or

missing in action, but you can hardly say that God has been rendered unnecessary by virtue of humankind's maturity.

As a matter of fact, what many in the world experience today is an ever more urgent *longing* for God. This is especially true of those thoughtful folk who have let go of the God “up there,” the God with a personality, the “ride-to-the-rescue” God. Whole strains of theology, particularly after the Holocaust, have raised the question of whether God can be imagined to be omnipotent. Such a God was one of the first victims of the gas chambers and the crematoria. After all, if he existed, where was he when the six million went to their deaths? Other conceptions of God have similarly been found wanting. The God who seemed to have an obsessive and legalistic interest in the behavior of individuals—particularly their sexual behavior. The punishing God whose grace could be bought only by the blood sacrifice of his son. And the God who would consign people to hell for an accident of their birth or some subtle error of belief. These versions of God, too, became no longer credible, no longer worthy of much attention, and certainly not of worship. It is easy enough these days to rail against the ideas of God that have already been discredited, witness the marketing of pop-atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. But, as I said, thoughtful people, having let go of some of the old ideas, feel an honest and powerful longing for a God they *can* worship. The theologian Sam Keen, whom I recently visited in his California home, says this poignantly in his new book, *In the Absence of God: Dwelling in the Presence of the Sacred*.

He writes:

We who have been unsatisfied by any traditional religion have spent our lives in quest of a rose, but the closest we get is entering a room still redolent with the scent of a rose that was removed before we arrived. We cannot easily locate God in the house of our longing, yet we remain haunted; God's missing presence echoes throughout the empty rooms. In the void we hear faint hymns of an ancient faith for which we no longer have room among the endless quarks, waves, and subatomic particles identified by science. We exist in a God-shaped vacuum. That which is no longer present (but is not completely absent) gives shape to our aspirations and longings.<sup>1</sup>

And the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas describes the longing for God this way:

*They laid this stone trap  
for him, enticing him with candles...*

An arresting thought...to see the church as a great stone trap for God!

*They laid this stone trap  
for him, enticing him with candles,  
as though he would come like some huge moth  
out of the darkness to beat there.  
Ah, he had burned himself  
before in the human flame  
and escaped, leaving the reason  
torn. He will not come any more*

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<sup>1</sup>Sam Keen, *In the Absence of God: Dwelling in the Presence of the Sacred* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), 3.

*to our lure. Why, then, do I kneel still  
striking my prayers on a stone  
heart? Is it in hope one  
of them will ignite yet and throw  
on its illumined walls the shadow  
of someone greater than I can understand?*

I know that there are those who argue that God is not necessary to a viable practice of Christianity. Professor Lloyd Geering has a thoughtful book entitled *Christianity without God* that makes the argument well. Less academic folk ask plainly, “Can we not practice the ethics of Jesus without a belief in God?” I wonder what you think. And I know I’m sounding a bit like a bibliography this morning, but let me mention, too, a fine article by Glen Tinder that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* some years ago but which is easily found online. It is entitled simply, “Can We Be Good Without God?”

On these great questions, I have always taken some comfort from the story about Paul in the Areopagus that we read this morning from the Book of Acts. The Apostle Paul was in Athens, and he saw that many gods were worshipped there, so many that it seemed a confusion of divinities. He, of course, was preaching about Jesus, and he was taken by the Athenian philosophers to the Areopagus—a kind of appeals court—where they questioned him. He was brilliant in his defense. Pointing out an altar that was dedicated “to an unknown God,” he said, “This is the God I proclaim to you.” What is comforting about that to me is that it seems to say that wherever there is an opening in me, a place not locked down by certainty—my own altar to an “unknown God”—some new truth may come, some greater understanding, some deeper faith.

I would suggest that many thoughtful Christians today are atheists—not in the sense that we deny the existence or presence of God—but rather that we have sailed out from the harbor of the God we knew and are on a voyage toward the God who is. The language of theism, which describes the God we grew up with, is receding behind us. Ahead, a horizon lined with the holy fire of a sun just rising...an expanse so unimaginably beautiful that even a hint of it breaks the heart...and in the end the utter joy of the journey in which God is not the goal but the very sea beneath us. God, we find after all, may not be a thing to be grasped, or a being to believe in, but a presence to be experienced. Again, I wonder what you think. For myself, I don’t think that God is dead. But I sense that God, in God’s great love for us, has taken from us of our old ways of understanding, taken our knowledge, taken our certainty so that we might once again be called out, there to stand in awe, and tremble, and, in the very end, be blessed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.