
Religious Atheism

Luke 18:9-14

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 27, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

I'm a PK. That usually refers to 'preacher's kid.' It could mean, when I was growing up, 'Pentecostal kid' or 'Powery kid.' For Parents' Weekend, it could mean 'parents' kid.' And your college kid probably doesn't want you to know that it may also mean 'party kid.' For the PK, preacher's kids, it probably also means 'problem kid.' I didn't cause any bad problems but good problems. Fun problems. Running around the church sanctuary like a chicken with its head cut off after the service, bumping into church members and knocking over delicate church plants. Or, calling the girl, the one I eventually married, all types of names that shall not be repeated from this pulpit today. Or, sitting in the back pew, making fun of the various extroverted religious expressions of members, betting on the timing of when sister or brother so-and-so were going to stand, clap, or say 'amen'; there's nothing like a back row church perspective.

As a PK, I had an inside view of the church and its religious practices. Some would shout. Others would sit in silence. There were introverted and extroverted liturgical expressions. And the introverts and extroverts did not always understand each other. On one Sunday, I remember a particular woman beginning her usual shouting and dancing at what we called the altar at the front of the church; at that moment, another member leaned over and whispered to me in reference to this woman, "She must think God is deaf." In that moment, if I didn't realize it before, there were religious differences within one congregation. That congregation, like any, is not monolithic or homogeneous, and many times with different perspectives comes some friction. I've seen my share of church friction and faction, which also revealed to me how the church was sick and how in fact the church is for the sick.

We don't attend church because we are well. We come to church because we're sick and need to become well and whole. As the hymn says, we come "though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without." The church is a spiritual hospital and our sickness continues to be broadcast on television.

If you watch the new reality TV show on the Oxygen Network called "Preachers of L.A.," you'll see just how sick we really are and many Christians are tuning in. I suppose "Preachers of Durham" would not have the same high ratings. This show provides a glimpse into six high-profile male pastors from Los Angeles. It follows their public ministry, personal lives with their wives or girlfriends, operative theologies, prosperity ideologies, and obvious pathologies. I suppose that one of its purposes is to humanize religious leaders. Perhaps it does that, but at times it may just be TMI—too much information. This popular form of Christian religion edited and packaged for media ratings and economic aspirations may still be religious and someone may be getting the glory but I'm just not sure it is God.

Religion, in its etymological roots, has to do with binding or tying. That suggests that religious practices are a means to or representative of being bound to God. Religion is supposed to bind us to God but the irony of religiosity is that at times through our righteous religious sophistication we may actually lose sight of the very one to whom we are to be bound—God. God-talk may still be present but God is nowhere to be found. The religious means that should help us reach a holy end may actually untie us from what we truly desire. We can have a fine religious structure and framework but lose the core substance and sustainer of our faith.

"The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, [Tarheels!], or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'" This person is 'standing by himself' which really means in this context that he was standing in the presence of others to make a public announcement. He was in the crowd and in the in-crowd yet when we hear that he was 'praying,' it literally means that he was "praying to himself." His religious prayer even suggests that

God is an object and he, the religious person, is the subject. “I thank you that I am not like...I fast...I give a tenth.” “I” is the subject in this prayer, which reveals why he was only ‘praying to himself’ in his own spiritual universe. His prayer was like a political stump speech about all of his accomplishments, running for the position of God. It might be that God wasn’t even listening since he only prayed to himself.

I don’t want to castigate the Pharisee to such an extent that I perpetuate a tradition of anti-Judaism within Christian preaching. The point this morning is not to leave here saying, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like the Pharisee.’ This religious person may trust in himself and appear to be religiously arrogant but we should remember that this person represents a disciplined adherence to the moral and ethical religious code of faith. He’s the faithful, dependable, tithing type of person in the pew who pays the salaries of ministers so we can preach on the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector! But what he reveals is the possible way in which we can become so religious that when we pray we’re really only talking about ourselves and to ourselves. Thus, religion may only bind us to our own religiosity and not to God at all.

This is what I call “religious atheism.” Practicing religion atheistically, literally ‘without God.’ It may seem to be an oxymoron at first but one can be religious, one can be bound to a person, place, or thing and adhere to it, worship it, honor it, sing to it, pray to it, without *it* being God. That means you can be religious and atheist simultaneously because it is religion without God, perhaps where the self is god and we are really only praying to ourselves, deputizing ourselves to stand in the place of God with a religious god complex. Using God’s name for the human purpose of self-elevation. Just because one says ‘God’ doesn’t mean one knows God or believes in God. Just because one says it is “in God’s name” doesn’t mean that God has endorsed it. Religious atheism is rooted in religious certainty about oneself *and* others. The god—without God—complex makes the religious person the righteous holy and moral standard, the ecclesiastical judge and jury.

This apparent absence of humility is perhaps an indication of the lack of divinity in our lives because we must remember that Jesus emptied himself and humbled himself as a sign of the movement of God in his life. Religious ritual may ruin us if we only practice religion as a means to trust in and assure ourselves that we are righteous while others are not, placing ourselves at the center as we happily sing like Frank Sinatra, “I did it my way.”

I never really understood why standing up for God meant putting someone else down. Those “other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even ... this tax collector.” To practice religion without God, religious atheism, and to sit in a self-righteous seat of judgment means that one can determine who is in and who is out. When love is strangled out of religion, it becomes judgment. Worse yet, without the real presence of God, anything is bound to happen and it probably won’t be pretty. Jesus’ parable is directed toward those who “regarded others with contempt” or despised the rest. To grasp fully the extent of the contempt and disregard for others depicted here, it is important to note that Luke uses the term ‘despising’ in only one other place: the trial of Jesus when Herod with his soldiers treat Jesus with contempt and mock him (23:11). We know how that trial ends. Despising others may lead one to attempt to dominate, destroy, and crucify the other because without the presence of God (in religion) we are ultimately in the presence of death. Religious atheism, in the way that I’m thinking about it, disregards, despises others because God is not in it. And despising can be very dangerous, a precursor to conquering and domination. The Pharisee, though apparently holy, lacks mercy, and operates under the same imperial logic of the Roman Empire, which he sought to resist, the same logic that killed Jesus. A Godless religion can be that dangerous. It can perpetuate the very logic it wishes to resist and disregard the humanity of others such that destroying another is not a problem because it’s just those “other people.”

This is the logic of gun violence—the mere disregard for the humanity of another because they are just “other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors.” I am not like them or like that. I don’t believe this or that. Look at what they do or think. Because it is religious atheism, without God, I can replace God with a gun and bow down to its trigger and promote gun violence as a tool of domination and oppression; a gun may be the modern-day cross. Another school shooting this past week in Nevada. There are wars happening on our US streets and in our US schools. Over the past 50 years, three times more children and teens died from guns on American soil (160,000) than U.S. soldiers killed in action in wars abroad (52,820 killed in action in Vietnam,

Afghanistan, and Iraq.) Nearly three times more children and teens were injured by guns in 2010 (15,576) than the number of U.S. soldiers wounded in action that year in the Afghanistan war (5,247). Even a Louisiana pastor was shot and killed while preaching in his church just a few months ago. Guns have become gods ruling and reigning, destroying and dominating 'the other.'

The Christian church and other religions are not innocent, even if we think of all of the religious crusades and wars that have transpired. Or in our day, church groups like Westboro Baptist Church, which many view as a hate group, holds signs like "God hates you" at various protests. Despising others who are not in their own image.

The tax collector was not perfect. Don't get me wrong. They were a much-hated group in the ancient world. Some of them exploited others. They worked for the Roman Empire and were seen as being in collusion with them to oppress others. They were viewed to be outside the boundaries of holiness, ostracized, and their touch was unclean. They were on the margins of society, which is even indicated by his position in the temple as he prays, "standing far off." He is far away from the center of privilege and power, and though he stands "far off," he's the one, the non-religious, who beats his breast as a sign of humility and is justified by God's mercy. The despised one went home, bound to God.

Religious atheism maybe 'without God' but it is particularly without a God of mercy through its disbelief in a God of mercy. This is why a religious person can despise another as Jesus was despised. He or she may believe that mercy is unnecessary because of their self-righteousness but the irony is that they disbelieve in the very God they need! In Luke's gospel, from the beginning, God is a God of reversals, in which the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up. The excluded are included because God's mercy is as deep and wide as the cross. It is the merciful reversal of righteousness that God initiates through God's own volition. Mercy is something God extends to us and not even our own religiosity can manufacture it. We can't create the rule of mercy because we are not God, which is why religious atheism disbelieves in this God—because it can't be god in God's holy presence and it is merciless and does not comprehend "the wideness of God's mercy is like the wideness of the sea."

God does not play by our religious playbook. God forgives unconditionally and not according to our human religious standards. This parable is like the parable of the prodigal son in that it reveals a God who is prodigal with love and mercy. It is a story about God's greatness. A story of how God "levels the difference between the moral heights and valleys of human achievement"(John Caputo). We cannot earn nor do we deserve God's mercy. But like the lost son and the tax collector who both were "far off," God embraces us and welcomes us into the kingdom. Religious atheism may not believe in this God of mercy but it cannot prevent God from being God. It does not even prevent God from redeeming this rogue religion because there is nothing that God cannot forgive and restore, including distorted religion.

I'm so glad the Pharisee included "rogues" in his list of outcasts because even when religion goes rogue, far away from the heart of God, even functioning without God as an atheistic religious expression, God is still there, ready to shower mercy on us and our religious ways. Even when we get it wrong, God's mercy wants to make it right because his mercy is not dependent on right religion; it is totally dependent on the nature of God.

Jessica Eaves was shopping in Guthrie, Okla., when her wallet was stolen. She spotted the man she suspected of taking it in a nearby aisle and she wasn't sure what to do next. She decided to approach the man and calmly said, "I think you have something of mine. I'm gonna give you a choice. You can either give me my wallet and I'll forgive you right now, and I'll even take you to the front and pay for your groceries," or she would call the police. He reached in his pocket and gave it back to her. He started crying as they walked to the front and kept apologizing. Jessica paid \$27 for his groceries, which was almost all the money that she had in her purse. Mercy is not getting what we deserve but receiving what we need. May the mercy of God move us closer to other people—thieves, rogues, adulterers, and even tax collectors—because we've experienced God's mercy in our lives and recognize that nothing and no one is out of the reach of God's redemption, not even the Preachers of L.A. Let us pray, as the tax collector did: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Amen.