

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

I've preached more this summer than any I can remember in over 20 years. I've supplied in several parishes and seen how other congregations worship and I've enjoyed it, mostly. Last week as the congregation was leaving a parishioner, and remember I wasn't here last week, stopped me and said that he wanted to ask me a serious question about something that was bothering him. Being your average paranoid I immediately wondered what I'd said to offend him. So everyone left the church and went to coffee hour and he confronted me and after some preamble said to me that he believed that a contract was a contract and that the Presiding Bishop (PB) had violated hers and she should resign, that is if she has any integrity, which he doubts. After getting over the relief that I hadn't said anything to offend him I asked him what she had said.

According to this gentleman, she denied the reality of the Virgin Birth and he maintained that in the office of ordination of a bishop she had promised that she believed in the Virgin Birth. Now I can't imagine any context in which the PB, given all that's going on today with the politics of our ever diminishing precious denomination, would comment on the historicity of the Virgin Birth. I assured him that she had promised that she believed that the Bible contains all things necessary for salvation but she promised nothing about the Virgin Birth and that it could be understood in a variety of ways. He said that I was mistaken and if I had some time he would show me where it said it. I said that I didn't have time, there were other people to talk with, and I left him. I've since examined the office for the Ordination of a Bishop and the only mention of the Virgin Birth occurs in the Nicene Creed. Perhaps that's enough for the PB's detractors?

What is salvation dependent upon? Right beliefs? That, it seems to me, goes to the heart of this morning's gospel. Can we earn our way to God by observing certain prescribed rituals and by acknowledging certain proscribed behaviors? I doubt it, but that's the way faith is talked about in public.

People believe they can tell if you're Christian by your willingness to believe certain miraculous things about God, your future, and your role in determining your future. People who attack Christianity have good grounds for mocking this version of God. I've been fascinated for some time, but particularly recently, by all of the energy atheists are expending

attacking us. Fortunately they're not attacking a God that I recognize so they're welcome to attack the God they construct.

But they do go overboard, in my opinion, when they say that science and Christianity are irreconcilable. Especially when militant atheists oppose President Obama's nominee to head the NIH, he's an evangelical Christian, and the woman to be Surgeon General, she's a Roman Catholic, simply because they're Christian. Christianity is as irreconcilable to a closed mind as science is. Christianity is about questions not answers. Unfortunately in the popular mind, including many Christian minds, Christianity is all about believing that there is a god who cares enough for me to protect me from hardship, keep my spouse and children healthy and nurture my career. I'm reading a *My Sister, My Love* by Joyce Carol Oates and one of the characters becomes an Episcopalian because being one of us trumps being a Methodist in the corporate world. That may be so, but it has nothing to do with Christianity and faith.

We have permitted Christianity to be caricatured by people who preach the Gospel of Prosperity, or who talk about Rapture in the Left Behind Series, or who believe that like the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland:

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.

So we're expected to believe in the Virgin Birth, without inquiry into why, or the empty tomb, without inquiry into why, or that Moses divided the Red Sea, without inquiry into why. On that last, Exodus says he divided the Sea of Reeds, a swamp, and not the Red Sea, anyway. The Greek Old Testament says the Red Sea, not the Hebrew.

A friend handed me on Thursday the following quote from the British Atheist and Oxford Scholar, Richard Dawkins who describes Christians pejoratively by writing:

If you live in America, the chances are good that your next door neighbours believe the following: The Inventor of the laws of physics and Programmer of the DNA code decided to enter the uterus of a Jewish virgin, got himself born, then deliberately had himself tortured and executed because he couldn't think of a better way to forgive the theft of an apple, committed at the instigation of a talking snake. As Creator of the majestically expanding universe, he not only understands relativistic gravity and quantum mechanics but actually designed them. Yet what he really cares about is "sin," abortion, how often you go to church, and whether gay people should marry. Statistically, the chances are that your neighbours believe all that – and they can vote.

The Pharisees confront Jesus with the accusation that his followers don't observe the rituals like good Jews. The response is that the focus should be on how one behaves not how one observes ritual. Let me hasten to add that ritual is important; I wouldn't be an Episcopalian if I didn't believe that. But ritual does not make us Christian. The atheists who attack us have that right. God doesn't need me to pray, attend the Eucharist, say Morning Prayer or study theology. But if I am to understand what it means to be a Christian I must do these things.

There are some groups who meet regularly at Christ & Holy Trinity who have no difficulty believing that God exists. Yesterday morning over 150 men were in the Parish Hall and Undercroft. They are here every Saturday regardless of the season. They are here for AA meetings. This morning at 7:30 nearly 75 men were in Mackenzie. This Tuesday morning and Thursday morning, more than 50 men will be in the Parish Hall. Each of them believes that not only is there a God, but that God cares for him and is directly responsible for his sobriety.

Few of them agree on anything else about that God. Some are Christian, some Jewish, some even Muslim. Many grew up Catholic but have fallen away. They come together Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday mornings because they know that the atheists are wrong. They come together to share with each other their struggles with life, including with spirituality. Not all of them stay sober but the great majority do.

In my early days as a priest I preached a sermon using AA as a positive example of religion and a parishioner who was in the program stopped me afterwards to be certain that I understood that AA is not a religion. AA is a path to spirituality.

Why do so many more men come to Christ & Holy Trinity for AA than come here on Sunday for the Eucharist? There is a sense of community here as there is at AA, although perhaps it is stronger at AA. The difference is probably because AA talks consistently about what is important for the men to maintain sobriety. There is nothing, even drinking or using drugs, that someone in AA can do that will cause the community to reject him. (This applies to women too but I'm using four men's meetings as my example.) These meetings embody what I believe Jesus is saying in this morning's Gospel.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

I think our atheist friends have something. God as a rabbit foot does not exist. A St. Christopher's statue on your dashboard won't protect you. Burying a statue of Joseph upside down won't sell your house. Wearing a cross makes no difference. However, we can learn from AA, that there is a God who does care for us.

I worked for years with another member of the clergy who wanted to be sober but he could not bring himself to believe in a personal God. He was convinced that God existed and expected him to lead a certain lifestyle. But he could not believe that God would ever notice him. So he relapsed, frequently. Then he developed, out of desperation, the faith that God did care for him, and he has been sober now for several years.

I was convinced for many years that I alone had committed the unforgivable sin and was doomed. I hadn't done anything all that dramatic but in the ultimate act of narcissism, I believed that I had committed the unforgivable sin. The only way I could see any hope for me in the resurrection was through belief in universalism. Everyone makes it to heaven. This of course flies in the face of the many parts of the bible that talk about the reality of judgment since God does permit us to suffer the consequences of our actions. Thanks be to God, for the last 14 years I have had faith that God is part of my life. I've been ordained for 33 years, but only for 14 have I understood what faith means.

Another person I've worked with had difficulty believing in God because of the holocaust, he's not Jewish, he's catholic. He also had difficulty believing in God because of Pol Pot and the killings in Cambodia. How could God permit such atrocities? Fortunately he too has come to believe in a caring personal God. This has not gotten him back into the Catholic Church but it has given him some faith.

What kind of God is it that permits, or at least doesn't interdict, tragedies like the Holocaust, or the Cyclone that recently hit Taiwan, or Katrina, or 9/11 and the list goes on and on. Is this a God worthy of worship? Is this a God who makes a difference in who we are or should we be Episcopalians because it makes a difference in our corporate lives?

In this Joyce Carol Oates novel I'm reading the mom prays constantly for her daughter to succeed as an ice skater and she is convinced that if she prays enough that Jesus will insure her success. After all they belong to Trinity Episcopal! Now this would seem ridiculous except last week I received one of those annoying emails that promise you blessings if you forward it to 10 people and by implication, curses if you don't. It was the email of fantastically beautiful natural phenomena along with commentary thanking God for recovery from Cancer, or for a successful career, or for compliant beautiful children, etc. I never forward these to anyone unless there's an ironic or satirical twist to them. What kind of God is portrayed in this? One who provides material blessings to his followers and metes out sickness

and failure to those who don't? This is observably not true unless we conclude that sickness and failure are signs that you are rejected by God. I hope that no one here this morning holds that view.

The reason so many men come here four mornings a week at 7:30 is because the God they believe in deals with important things. How do I stay sober and lead a worthwhile life? Many of them lack religious instruction and commit unbelievable heresies. But God does not reject them for doing this. Some of them seek greater spiritual understanding and through recovery return to church or synagogue.

So, last Sunday when I was told that that the Presiding Bishop needed to resign because she had denied the reality of the Virgin Birth I was at a loss for a response. The Virgin Birth is an interesting and important doctrine, but belief in it is not necessary for salvation, or for being the presiding bishop. Some of you have heard me expound on the Virgin Birth and I'd be glad to talk with you about it over coffee.

I constantly hope for the church that it will do more to be the place that we bring the important issues of our lives. I constantly hope for the church that it will do for its members what AA does for its members. I constantly hope for the church that we will see it as an organization that will never expel us as long as we desire to belong and that whatever issue we bring to the church it will be received by the rest of us with caring and support. Were we to witness to God in this fashion the atheists would have no argument. It would be clear that God has called us into community and that this community is crucial to our existence.