

Unbelief

I believe that God calls on us all to love and respect all of God's creation. That includes caring for the Earth which God has put under our stewardship, what Genesis calls "tending and keeping the garden," doing everything we can to limit and reverse the destruction of our planet which human beings have wantonly engaged in, causing untold, unknown, and possibly irreversible damage to our climate and ecology. Loving and respecting all of God's creation also includes exercising proper stewardship over the other living things who share the planet with us, preventing extinction of species, using sustainable farming and harvesting techniques, showing kindness to animals, avoiding unnecessary killing of animals and plants, giving thanks to God for the lives we do end in order to sustain our own. And, of course, loving and respecting all of God's creation includes acting in love towards all other human beings – those who do or do not look like us, talk like us, share our culture, think like us or even believe like us. But sometimes, acting in love and respect for other human beings includes saying, lovingly, "I disagree." Sometimes we have to say, "The way you are on leads to death."

We grow up hearing warnings from our parents and, in turn, warn our children. "Don't touch the hot stove." "Don't stick things in the electrical sockets." "Just because your friends do it doesn't mean you can." Those sorts of warnings are really pretty easy. But sometimes, we have to say harder things. "You're drinking too much." "Your relationship with that person isn't healthy." "What you are doing hurts the work we are trying to do together." "What you are doing is hurting others." "What you are doing is hurting yourself."

It can be hard to have conversations like that, even when we are discussing behavior around which there is general consensus: addictions, abusiveness of various kinds, criminal activity. But it gets really difficult when we are addressing behaviors that reflect personal beliefs or unbeliefs. It is unbelief I want to address this morning, the kind which caused the Psalmist to write, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" I'm not talking now about different expressions of religious faith, either from our fellow Children of Abraham, other Christians, Jews, or Muslims, nor of the non-monotheistic beliefs of Buddhists, Hindus, and others. Nor am I talking about the kind of searching agnosticism that remains unconvinced about the existence of a deity while maintaining a goodwill for others. I'm talking about those people, some who even claim to be religious, whose behavior displays in some way a lack of belief in ethical and moral standards, whose self-centeredness proclaims that they do not believe in acting from love and respect for others, those who see only their own desires without a thought for others, including a deity who would hold them to a less egotistical yardstick.

I'm moved toward these considerations this morning by the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 12, which I read to you a moment ago. I think it's this kind of unbelief that he's addressing in verses 38-45, and, of course, his audience there are religious leaders with whom he'd clashed on numerous occasions. For them, as is still the case with many "religious" people today, it was easy to talk about God incessantly while acting as if God either did not exist or had no power over them.

Let's take a moment to review the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees in the latter part of this chapter of the Gospel According to Matthew. Starting in verse 22, as we heard two weeks ago, Jesus heals someone who is both blind and mute. In the understanding of that day, he cast a demon out of the sufferer. But the Pharisees say that Jesus must have been able to do it because

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he's an ally of the ruler of the demons, Beelzebul. They don't believe that Jesus is the one sent by God. Jesus points out that the Pharisees have exorcists in their party as well and inquires whether they cast out demons with the power of Beelzebul or if they do it by the power of God? A house divided against itself, he points out, cannot stand, a line later applied to Civil War America by President Lincoln. He goes on to warn them that speaking against the Holy Spirit, which they are doing by attributing the work he does to demonic forces, is unforgiveable. He is calling out their unbelief.

I ended that sermon two weeks ago by looking at what Jesus had to say about how our words reveal our hearts. As he warned the Pharisees, "for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." What we say matters. It matters whether we tell the truth or lie. It matters whether we hold ourselves to promises or forget them. It matters whether we speak kindly or harshly to others or even to ourselves. We can tell a lot about people by what they say and how they say it.

You would think that these words from Jesus might have made the Pharisees be quiet for a bit, maybe go away and think about what he had said and what it meant to them. But, like so many of us, they just can't stop talking. "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you," they say. Oh, man. A sign? He's just healed a guy who was blind and mute, someone they all thought was possessed by a demon they couldn't get rid of. He's been in the district, it appears from the rest of the chapter, for at least a day or two, healing every sick person that was brought to them. And these Pharisees want a sign? They just can't shake their unbelief. Essentially, they're asking him to do tricks for them, not unlike the darkly hilarious scene in "Jesus Christ Superstar" with King Herod: "So if You are the Christ / You're the great Jesus Christ / Prove to me that You're no fool / Walk across my swimming pool..."

In his volume on Matthew for the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, Ben Witherington III points out that these are exactly the sorts of miracles that Jesus does not do: "...there is a difference between a request for a miracle out of some need, to which Jesus responds in a compassionate manner, and a request for a miracle to prove something about one's self. The latter is some sort of validating sign, and the former is an act of compassion." Witherington also cites another recent scholar, Donald Hagner, who wrote the volume on Matthew in the Word Biblical Commentary: "Yet this is precisely the kind of miracle—a demonstrative display of power for the purpose of impressing—that Jesus would not perform."

What both of those scholars skirt around saying is that the sign requested by the Pharisees is, in essence, the same kind of miracle requested by the Tempter during Jesus' sojourn in the desert following his baptism. If anybody in this story is in league with the Powers of Darkness, it's them. I find Jesus' response actually pretty restrained, all things considered. "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

Let's talk about the sign of Jonah for a bit. What does Jesus mean by this? The first part is clear to us, though it wouldn't have been to the Pharisees. "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth." I trust you all remember the story of Jonah from your childhoods, how he

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was told by God to go to preach to Nineveh and how he instead took a ship for Tarshish, in the complete opposite direction. Jonah was suffering from unbelief. He didn't really believe that the God of Israel would know where he was and be able to act on him away from Israel. You remember how the sailors threw him overboard at his own urging in order to quell a storm and how he was swallowed by a great fish. God used what looked like calamity to get Jonah to where he needed to be to do what God wanted to be done. Likewise, God will shortly use Jesus' execution by the Romans to get Jesus where he needs to be to do what God wants to be done – he defeats death and proves that death ultimately has no power over those who trust in God. But Jesus has yet to spend that Friday evening before sunset, all day Saturday, and Sunday, starting at what would call sunset on Saturday, in the tomb. The Pharisees don't know that Jesus, too, is to spend three days in the belly of the beast.

But they would have known the story of Jonah as well or better than we do. I hope you remember from three weeks ago how feared and hated the Assyrians were, those merciless imperial stormtroopers with their capitol in Nineveh. They destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and very nearly the Southern Kingdom of Judah, too. But the story of Jonah says that God gave even the Assyrians the chance to repent by sending Jonah to them. And, the story says, they repented. Jonah 3:5-9 says: "And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'"

Modern scholars are pretty well convinced that the story of Jonah is a fable, written long after the disappearance of the Assyrians from the scene. But the Pharisees believed it was literally true, as well as symbolically, and Jesus certainly meant for them to. "The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!" They are in the midst of witnessing, not merely a prophet come to warn them, but the incarnation of God Godself come to them with a call to repentance and the good news of God's own love. It was a miracle that God kept Jonah alive in that fish's belly for three days, but God is going to raise the murdered Jesus from the dead. And the Pharisees just don't get it. They're not willing to set aside their unbelief.

Suspecting as much, Jesus gives them another warning: "The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!" This is another of those Old Testament stories that many of us learned in Sunday School, probably with the aid of felt pictures. When Solomon, the son of David, became king over the united Hebrew kingdom, he prayed to God for wisdom, which God granted him. In fact, King Solomon became so well-known for his amazing wisdom that the Queen of Sheba, herself known for her beauty and wealth, came to pay homage to him. Muslim tradition says that she had a child by Solomon

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and returned to her home to raise the child and to spread the worship of the One God. Ethiopia and Southern Arabia have both claimed to be the location of ancient Sheba.

The point that Jesus is making, however, is that one greater than Solomon stands before the Pharisees and still they don't believe. While Solomon was known for the wisdom that God granted him, Jesus *was* the Wisdom of God. This is part of what the Gospel of John claims in its famous prologue: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." As we know, the Logos (Greek for Word) was a common concept in Jewish thought around the time of Jesus, encapsulating the Wisdom and creative power of God. Jesus, we believe, was the Logos, the Word, and the Wisdom of God.

Still, the Pharisees don't get it. Or won't get it. "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Because Jesus isn't dancing to the tune they call, the Pharisees refuse to believe that it is the Holy Spirit working through him. Because he isn't "their boy," he can't possibly be what everyone is saying he is. In chapter 23 of Matthew, Jesus will call them "whited sepulchres," because they are dead on the inside, devoid of the divine spark. He uses a similar image to describe them here: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So, will it be also with this evil generation."

The Pharisees heard and saw and could have touched the incarnation of God but they were so focused on themselves and what they were sure was right that they dismissed him, disbelieved him, denounced him, and participated in his government-approved lynching. They were dead inside. Do we see people like them today? Sadly, I say the answer is "yes." Anyone who can issue or carry out orders to separate children from their parents and lock them in cages denies with their words and actions the existence of our Loving Creator. Anyone who can kneel on the neck of another human being who calls out for his mother and says, repeatedly, "I can't breathe," is dead inside. Anyone who can arrange the sale of weapons in destabilized parts of the world or to governments that will use them against their own citizens in order to enrich themselves or their constituents is ignoring the reality of a God who says, "You shall not kill," and we should confess that that has been the policy of the United States government under both parties for a long, long time.

My sisters and my brothers, many of us are focused on the results of the election that is coming, an election in which total results may not be known for weeks or even months, and that is right and proper. But the reality is that there is something much more deeply wrong with our nation than one election can cure. Despite our inclusion of "under God," in our national Pledge of Allegiance, despite the still high poll numbers of those they say they believe in God, despite the political power of those who call themselves Christians, our country has become a nation of fools who say "there is no God" in actions if not in words.

We are called to push back against this tide. We are called to stand for the poor and the dispossessed, for the underprivileged and undereducated, for the hungry and the homeless and

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the ragged. Whoever wins these elections and claims that they represent us going forward, we must remember that our government is a government of the people, by the people and for the people, and we must continue to work, however we can, to be sure that that means all the people. God has called us to love our neighbor, all of our neighbors, and if we ignore our God, we might as well say that there is no God. May God give us the courage and the will to do what is right. Amen.