

FAITH WITH OR WITHOUT GOD?

Psalm 1, Matthew 5: 43-48

Do you believe in God? That's a question many people ask these days. According to the latest census numbers in Canada, the fastest growing group in terms of the religious spectrum are those who claim no religion and no faith in God. There may be many immigrants and refugees that flood our places of worship in Canada, but those who have lived here a generation or two, and certainly their children, have less and less use for organized religion or faith in God.

But here's the thing. As Lillian Daniel points out in her book "Tired of Apologizing for a Church I don't Belong To" (our book club book for our March 3 gathering), the God people think they're embracing or rejecting, is too often never questioned. People assume that the word "God" has a definition everyone knows, understands and accepts. Whether you accept or reject God or faith in God is based on a concept of God that's pretty straightforward. Really? What if there are very different understandings and definitions of the word "God"? And what if the God you accept or reject has never been scrutinized in terms of honest questioning or reflection?

In fact, as Daniel argues, media coverage of religious issues usually features two groups – fundamentalists on the one side or atheists on the other. One group not only believes in God. They believe that anyone who doesn't believe in God as they understand God is eternally doomed. The other group believe that only fools believe in God. The problem, as Daniel points out, is that both fundamentalists who embrace God and atheists who reject God hold a similar understanding of God. According to Daniel, and I'm totally with her on this, the God fundamentalists embrace and the God atheists reject is a false God. The God the fundamentalists believe in deserves to be rejected totally if that's all the God there is. And atheists are wasting their time knocking down a God more thoughtful and compassionate Christians would totally reject too.

The problem is, fundamentalists will never question their understanding of God and still remain fundamentalists. The problem is also that many atheists resist any questioning about the God they want to hold up as a Piñata to knock down. Thoughtful Christians would totally agree with atheists in rejecting God if the only option for God was a fundamentalist one. The problem is, most atheists don't want to think about alternative understandings of God or alternative readings of the bible. They'd rather have their fundamentalist God as a Pinata to knock down. And unfortunately, media coverage of religious issues tends to side with more extreme views whether they're fundamentalist Christians or hardened atheists because that

makes more interesting news stories. What do I mean? Let's consider one story that's been covered quite a bit in our Canadian news over the last 6 months or so.

The United Church has been divided over how to deal with one of their ministers: Gretta Vosper. Vosper ministers a small congregation in Scarborough. But Vosper is also an atheist, and she has openly declared herself an atheist to her congregation and the wider church. She has even written a book about it called: "With or Without God." At one point, the United Church came to majority agreement that an openly atheist minister has no place within a Christian church where faith in God is a basic tenet. But with the potential legal costs of holding some kind of "heresy" trial, both sides have backed away from doing anything about it. Those members of Vosper's church that have a hard time with her atheism have left, while those who embrace her atheism have stayed.

The problem with the media coverage, though, is that nothing much has been written about what it is Vosper believes or rejects about God and whether there are different ways of understanding God. What if you don't recognize the God you believe in, in the God Vosper describes she rejects? What if Vosper and other atheists have thrown out the baby with the bathwater? What if people outside the church reading the news coverage and Vosper's description of God believe this is all the God there is to be believed or rejected?

In her book, Vosper argues that we can have a religion of love, where we embrace Christian values without having to believe in God. She calls her faith non-theistic. But why does she need to reject God as the foundation of her values? Is it possible to have values of ultimate authority in our lives if we just make them up ourselves or pick and choose them like items in a supermarket, but with no larger transcendent foundation? Well, like many other atheists, Vosper argues that faith in God is the cause of much of the bad news in the world. People who use violence, terror and murder are religious people much of the time. The fact that this is not corroborated by the facts makes no difference to Vosper. She also says that God as taught by Christianity is a supernatural being who is authoritarian, who controls the universe and judges certain kinds of people, condemning them to an eternal hell, while saving the right kind of people, transporting them to heaven after they die. This God also intervenes in the world to protect and heal the righteous while those not in the righteous camp can interpret their bad luck as punishments from God. According to parts of the bible, moreover, God even encourages violence and murder to defend 'His' honour. Of course, Vosper's argument has been made by other celebrity atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens too.

But let me ask you all: is this a God you've heard preached here at Armour Heights? Where does Vosper get such an understanding of God? Well, fundamentalist Christians teach an understanding of God very much as Vosper describes the God she rejects. Certainly there are ways to read many parts of the bible to justify this kind of understanding of God, too,

especially in the Older Testament. Certainly there have been large segments of Christianity historically that have taught this kind of understanding of God too. But I would be hard pressed to find a way to honestly say that Jesus reveals and embodies such a God. And Jesus is the foundation upon which not only the New Testament is built, but how the New Testament then interprets the Old Testament too. Clearly Vosper is rejecting a God totally different than the God Jesus reveals and embodies. What do I mean?

Let's dig into our scripture readings for some revelatory insight and let's begin with Psalm 1. According to a surface reading more akin to fundamentalism, Psalm 1 can be read in the following way: the world is divided between good and bad people. The bad are called wicked, sinners and scoffers. The good are called righteous. The righteous resist the temptations and triggers of the wicked and remain faithful to God's moral law. Their faithfulness will be rewarded. They will prosper and succeed in all they do in the end. The wicked, on the other hand, may prosper here and there, but ultimately, they will go down, or as the psalm declares: "they will perish." And who will make sure this happens? God will. God judges and God controls everything, and God will make sure the righteous prosper and the wicked perish.

But is this the only way to read Psalm 1? According to a fundamentalist reading of the scriptures, such a reading of Psalm 1 is the only reading possible. This is what the bible teaches about God and about the world.

The funny thing is, Vosper also believes that this is the only way to read large parts of the bible. Jesus is an exception and we'll get to Jesus in a moment. But Jesus is at odds with the rest of the bible more or less. Too bad he held on so stubbornly to faith in God with some even claiming he was the revelation and embodiment of God. Too bad there weren't more atheists around to help Jesus and his disciples get rid of the idea of God altogether.

But here's the thing: Jesus not only reveals a whole other picture of God. He reveals and embodies a whole other way of living life in communion with God. And more. Jesus says repeatedly in his core teaching, that "you may have heard it said by those in authority, but I say to you..." In other words: you have received a certain interpretation of God's laws, God's nature and God's will. But I'm giving you a whole other way to understand God and live in communion with God. If you listen to what I'm saying and open your heart to it, you will be changed, you will live differently and God will become real for you in a way you've never imagined or known before.

This is why Jesus clashed with the religious authorities. They were in direct conflict over their visions of God, which also meant they were in conflict over their values. So what did Jesus reveal and how does he give us a whole other way of interpreting the scriptures? Let's look at our gospel reading. Jesus too refers to the righteous and the unrighteous, just like Psalm

1. But instead of calling the unrighteous “wicked sinners” he calls them “enemies.” Enemy is not saying anything objectively about the person themselves. It’s a relational term. If I think of someone as my enemy, it’s hard to see anything good in them or any possibility of good in them. Unless I change the way I see, I will always see the world as a clear division between the righteous and unrighteous. But what if my vision is changed through my relationship with God? What if I am transformed within by a larger power of love?

In fact, Jesus says, if you want to have a real relationship with God where instead of making up or choosing your own values, you submit to a higher law of love that’s greater than you and calls you to change. You need to become more like God. And what is God like? “God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous,” Jesus declares. If you just love those who love you back, how are you any better than anyone else? You need to reach higher in your love because that’s how God is. God created because God loves and God’s love is impartial. God loves regardless of what people do or fail to do. Why? Because God always holds out the possibility for communion, that maybe the person locked inside their wicked ways may feel some regret and seek out some change and be drawn into relationships of healing, reconciliation and friendship. That’s why we need a lot of love in us if we’re going to live as children of God.

What if the law of God referred to in Psalm 1 is all about love? And what if the righteous are regarded as righteous because they’ve been converted to love? And what if the wicked are wicked because they’ve been trapped in anti-love ways that isolate them and lead to relationships of mistrust, hostility and misery? And what if the ways of love are their own reward and prosperity, because the happiness, joy and fullness that loving relationships can provide are better than any material prosperity and security? And what if the way of wickedness leads to ruin because there’s nothing worthwhile to live for in the end if you burn through your relationships and keep hurting and abusing people until there’s no one left who’s willing to love you? And what if the only hope left for you is: surrendering to a God whose grace and forgiveness will always keep a door open for you to walk through when you’ve messed up? And what if such a God inspires believers who are prepared to open a door for you even when you least deserve another chance? Wow! What a different reading!

That’s how I read Psalm 1 and the whole bible because I’m reading it all through the eyes and heart of Jesus. Yes the bible has its negative parts and its contradictions. But my authority as a Presbyterian is Jesus Christ the living Word to whom the written words of scripture must bear witness to be divine. And Jesus is intimately rooted in God above, beside and within him.

And so, I believe in God, pray to God and worship God because I need a higher power of love to convict me and transform me regularly because on my own steam, my loving is limited even at the best of times. I also need others in community who share my orientation of

openness to the God of Jesus as the basis of a rich and meaningful life. Too bad so many have turned their backs on God and the church. Goodness knows the church and many who have claimed faith in God have given people enough reason to turn away. Sadly, though, people like Vosper should know better. Jesus wasn't just going around as a nice teacher of friendly, loving values. He was claiming to reveal and embody a costly love that required constant inspiration and empowerment through a higher power. May we keep renewing and refreshing our identity as followers of the God of Jesus, a God who will make us like "trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in their season, and their leaves do not wither. In all they do, they prosper." Why? Because they and we are rooted in a greater love whom we call: God.

Amen.