

“Atheism 7.0”

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, November 15, 2009

Although I am taking an enormous risk, and potentially dividing our congregation into subcategories you may never live down, I want to ask you a question this morning. If you are a Mac user, would you please raise your hand? I have been learning about you. You are a proud people, I am told – part of the “Mac family” – who when considering a computer for your home or office, are not plagued with questions of RAM and processors, or hard drive and connectivity, or software choices. You have a simple decision: *do I want a laptop or a desktop?* Because Apple has made all of those hard decisions for you. I mean *they* are the computer guys right? So the most important thing is to be able to turn it on, right out of the box, and have it just *work*. I can’t believe that I am not a Mac user. It’s actually my nature, I believe, to want things to work out of the box.

But I am a PC user. Now, I must say that I am a *reluctant* PC user, because I have been tempted to cross over to the other side on several occasions. (Especially after my current experience owning a laptop with *Vista*...) I am what they call a dangerous PC user. By chance, I learned on PCs. Over the years, likely because of my age and school system, as we progressed from floppy drives the size of my head to CD drives and USB, I never had a Mac lab in school. So by necessity of my situation, I have learned exactly enough about PCs and IBM compatible operating systems to get me into trouble. I know just enough to get me out of some pickles I manage to get into, but most still land way over my head. I want to make the most of my computing experience by having more software applications to run, and by having the possibility of manipulating the data in a variety of ways. And I have these habits: I know how to do a disk clean up and how to defrag, and I can organize with explorer. Let me warn you, this may in fact be the geekiest sermon I have ever written, so hold on.

Now I have spent some time on a Mac, in various places. And I find myself getting frustrated very quickly, with my habitual right clicking, the resize button on the left instead of the right... you get the picture. And yet I *love* what Macs can do. From the baseline that Macs create, you can learn how to do way more than with a PC. PCs nearly force you to learn a brand new language in order to keep up. With a Mac, it’s easy to do Website design, music editing, photo and video editing.

So why haven’t I switched? Why am I hanging on to a PC whose operating system I loathe?

Vista has been almost like learning a brand new system. (The *least* intuitive of the supposedly intuitive systems I have ever used.) It is interesting, because it is *not* about my loyalty to PCs, whereas Mac users are definitely loyal – freakishly loyal sometimes. No, it's not my loyalty. It's just that I am already fairly competent within the framework of that system. I already “speak” PC, so when I need help I can get it. Believe me, I have spent hours online with the technical departments of various IBM compatible companies. (My favorite question: “Please double check, ma'am that the computer's power cord is plugged into the outlet.”) But I can get actually around in the PC world.

What if that familiarity is holding me back from creating something new? Seriously, I have learned an entire set of skills that, outside the IBM compatible world, are completely and totally useless. It's like I speak Latin and they are the only people who can help me keep my language alive. I keep buying PCs because it's familiar, which is ridiculous. I keep buying PCs because my first computer was a PC. That argument works *nowhere else* in my life. I am a tad rebellious by nature, so the whole Mac computer cult lifestyle, although intriguing, also, I think, keeps me from switching, for fear of losing something – or for fear of being brainwashed in some way. For example, I would worry, if I bought a Mac, about if I really made that choice myself. Or did those cute ads with the dorky PC guy, and the hip artistic cultural creative looking Mac dude, change my mind? And there is, of course, the rumor, that once you go Mac – you'll never go back. That's a little frightening. “Either / or” has never worked well for me. Even though in some settings, among friends, I am completely outnumbered by Mac users... I just want to be *sure*.

Similar to my computer dilemma, I also felt a bit outnumbered at a recent event at the church I want to tell you about. You may have read about it in the Parish Notes. I was at a dinner surrounded by familiar faces, and a few newer members whom I did not know as well. We took the opportunity to go around the room and talk about how we had arrived at All Souls. It was a gathering of about 16 people, and as we went around, one person spoke up and said they were atheist. From then on it seemed most everyone else at the table also mentioned they too were atheist. I have to tell you I was quite surprised at the lack of theological diversity at such a gathering, and so were the newer members. One member had brought his mom with him and that was the first event at the church she had ever attended – I'm not sure the dinner helped quell any of her fears about what her son was getting into.

What was intriguing to me, was that even though they were all using the word *atheist*, because I happened to have some context for who they were, context for their lives and their history, because I *had heard them* discuss their beliefs before, I knew that that the word “atheist” meant something different to each one of them. Yet we didn't have the opportunity to have that

theological conversation. So most people, I believe, walked away believing that they all believed the same thing. The conversation *about* belief is so much more important. Atheist needs some context in order to be meaningful.

In his new book “Good Without God” Harvard’s Humanist chaplain Greg Epstein makes a distinction that I believe is critical.... he writes,

*so many smart people still think that a conversation about what is true and meaningful and worthwhile in life, begins with the question “Do you believe in God?” But “Do you believe in God?” is a totally meaningless question. The real question all people – whether secular or religious – ought to be asking themselves, and one another, is, “What do you believe **about** God?”*¹

My guess is that if there had been opportunity to have that conversation around that All Souls dinner table that we would have found more in common than divides us. In order to understand what someone means when they call themselves an atheist, we need to know what *about God* they do not believe.

The term atheist comes from the Greek *a theos* meaning "without gods," which was derogatorily applied to anyone thought to not believe in the accepted gods of the culture. So this included those who believed in false gods, no gods, or simply doctrines that stood in conflict with the established religions. In fact, early Christians were considered atheists; as they boldly proclaimed God was one, they stood in opposition to the polytheism of the time. So in a sense, if we believe that the majority of Americans, or the majority of Oklahomans, believe in a fundamentalist Christian God, then rejecting that God would make everyone in this church likely fit into the category of atheist. If we mean *not* believing in that particular God. And that doesn’t help us understand what we *do* in fact believe about God or at least about what is at the center of our lives.

As mentioned in the reading earlier, there are many different versions of atheism. There is the broad denial that there is any creator or manager of the universe. There is another conviction that, even if there *is* a creator/manager of the world, she does not reward the good and punish the wicked. There is “existential” atheism, the assertion that even if there is a God, he does not intervene in our lives. There is “agnostic” atheism, the cautious denial that claims that God’s existence can be neither proved nor disproved. Another cautious denial version of atheism claims that the word “God” is so confusing that it is in fact meaningless. And finally, there is “pragmatic” atheism, as described in Epstein’s book, which regards God as irrelevant to ethical and successful living, and views all discussions about God as a waste of time. Ironically, I don’t find pragmatic atheism to be very pragmatic, if you are in the least bit interested in getting to know or understand your fellow human beings.

There is an abundance of literature out currently that argues for a new atheism, beyond all of these previous versions I have described, that has taken shape through people like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. And even though they are getting an enormous amount of attention, I must say I have not been very moved. I would agree with Karen Armstrong, who argues in her newest book, *The Case For God*, that

...the New Atheist's analysis is disappointingly shallow, because it is based on such poor theology.² Religion, [she says] was never supposed to provide answers to questions that lay within the reach of human reason. Religion's task, closely allied to that of art, was to help us to live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve; morality, pain, grief, despair, and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life....Religion is a practical discipline.³

Just like the fundamentalists whom they argue against, Armstrong claims that

...the New Atheists believe that they alone are in possession of truth. They read scripture in an entirely literal manner and seem never to have heard of the long tradition of allegoric interpretation or indeed of Higher Criticism.⁴ Thus, Dawkins is not correct to assume that fundamentalist belief either represents or is even typical of either Christianity or religion as a whole.⁵ And [she concludes] he is also wrong to claim that God is a scientific hypothesis, that is, a conceptual framework for bringing intelligibility to a series of experiments and observations.⁶

So you can call me an atheist too, if it means I don't believe in a fundamentalist Christian God. If it means I don't believe God brings solutions to scientific problems. You can call me an atheist if it means I don't believe in a hateful, disdainful, meddling God who grants favors. If it means I don't believe in a God who causes natural disasters and plays favorites. You can call me an atheist too if it means I don't believe in a God that will only bless those who say certain words, pray certain prayers, or read certain books. But we need to be in dialogue for you to know that, and the label of atheist alone may not help us get there. Just because I might call myself an atheist, in certain contexts, doesn't mean I can't follow the example of Jesus, use theist language, or pray to an all-loving comforting source within and among us that I have personally experienced.

Although... I must admit, sometimes I catch myself *behaving as though* I believe in a punishing god – a wrathful god. You know, that god with his finger on the SMITE button, just waiting for some excuse to push it? I have to stay on my toes to not fall into this trap. It was ingrained in me very young, not just through the churches of my youth, but through the culture. I am clear that I no longer prescribe to that theism. I also know professed atheists who *behave* as though there is a smite-button-God just waiting to rob them of success they may have. Our behavior shows what we

believe sometimes before we can even articulate it. The good news is that we have the power to change both what we believe and how we behave. We don't have to stick with what is just presented to us by chance.

The conversation that will actually help us understand ourselves, and one another, is not *are you a theist or an atheist?* The value of the conversation does not come from these categories. The value of the conversation comes from describing what we think *about GOD, about humanity* and *about what we value in this world*. We can learn a lot in a conversation that describes what we think about God. When we learn about what is at the center of our lives, what is important to us, how we spend our time and energy, what values we hold.

In Cleveland, where I was a Sabbatical minister, there is a man named George who has been at that church for an incredibly long time. He is in his eighties, and walks with a cane, but rides a motorcycle! He is just the kind of interesting fellow you would love to spend time getting to know. And I did – I adore him. He and his wife would have me to dinner, and we would talk about the church, and his beliefs, and my future in the ministry. But every Sunday, without fail, he would give me what I called *the God Count*. He would come through the line following the service, with carefully drawn tick marks on the top of his order of service, adding up the number of times in that service that I had used the word *God*. I would usually just smile and say, “Really? I didn't know that.” “Huh, more than last week?” or “Wow, fewer this time?”

Finally after about four or five weeks in a row, I said “George, what do you think I mean, when I say the word *God*?” We had had countless conversations about what God means to me in private, but something about hearing God on Sunday in front of everyone made it different. And he said, “Well I don't know... I am guessing you aren't talking about some white man in the sky.” I said, “No, I'm not.” Then I asked him, “George, have you ever had a feeling that you were part of something larger than yourself? When you were just overwhelmed by gratitude or love or hope?” He paused for a long moment and I could tell that he was taking my question thoughtfully and digging into the recesses of his memory.

He said, “You know, I was married before my current wife, for a short time when I was really young. And we were trouble together, but I really loved her. One day she just left me. I thought I would never get through it. It tore me in two. And that night, I remember waking up in the middle of the night in a sweat, and sitting straight up in bed. I had this feeling as though I was not alone in the room anymore. And I had this thought out of nowhere, that it was going to be ok... that *I* was going to be ok.” I paused to let his memory end and for him to return to the present, his God count for the

day still in hand. Then I pointed to the order of service, “every time I say the word *God*, **that** is what I mean, George. That is **exactly** what I mean.”

George is an atheist. And he became an even newer version of atheist, I would argue, than that crew of academics I mentioned earlier. (I would consider them the *Vista* of the atheist world.) But there is an even newer atheist, like George. Let’s call it *Atheism 7.0*. It is the atheist who values the power of allegory and metaphor. It’s the atheist who goes to church, and who believes religion has intrinsic value. Atheists who understand that fundamentalist atheism is just as detrimental as fundamentalist Christianity. Atheists who see the humanity in all people as valuable, even while in difficult conversation. So this newer Atheism has reached version 7.0, and like Microsoft, appears to be listening to the user and incorporating their ideas into their programming.

Now I need you to know, as I typed this sermon on my laptop, Vista froze several times and had to be rebooted. And my power cord only charges if I twist the connector in *just* the right spot. It takes almost 5 minutes to completely boot up, so it’s probably time for me to get a new one. Am I confident enough that I would survive the change to cross over into the Mac family? Where the behind-the-scenes is a mystery, all the parts were made by the same company, and there is only one help number to call? Or would it result in even more frustration? I find myself intrigued by 7.0. Maybe it’s enough to make me invest my money with *one more Windows product*...

Here’s what I do know. Regardless of what laptop I end up buying, regardless whether you call me a Mac user or a PC user, a theist or an atheist, the sermons will still be the same.