

7-29-12

## Fools Say in Their Hearts...

Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14  
John 6:1-21

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God...'" (Ps. 14:1) Oh, those pesky atheists! How easy it is to blame them for "holiday parties" instead of Christmas parties, and the absence of prayer in our schools – although I seriously doubt anyone can stop it before a big exam. Those pesky atheists, [who have] "no **invisible** means of support," (J. Buchan\*)...and can "watch a Notre Dame –Southern Methodist University football game and [not] care who wins." (Dwight D. Eisenhower\*) (*\*Webster's Dict. Of Quotable Definitions*; p. 32) According to the psalmist, those who say "There is no God" are fools – and no doubt we would agree.

But wait! – as they say on TV – There's more! This claim isn't as simple as it seems. The atheists I've read about are pretty vocal about their beliefs or lack of them. Our psalmist, however, isn't talking about the dyed-in-the-wool non-believer. For him – or her – those who say there is no God may well be living a double life: outwardly engaging in religious practice – doing all the right things - saying all the right prayers - but inwardly believing, consciously or otherwise, something very different.

They are called fools; but foolishness here is a moral assessment not an intellectual one. It isn't about a lack of knowledge: it's about the failure to acknowledge God in trustful obedience – failure to keep God first in our lives, failure that leads to misplaced priorities and misguided behavior. The issue isn't philosophical; it's practical – a far more subtle trap we fall into when we act as though we are not accountable for our actions and attitudes – or excuse or rationalize our bad behavior. (*New Interp. Bible*: vol. 4: Psalms; p. 729)

What we're talking about is sin: missing the mark; straying off the path, breaking the Ten Commandments. "Fools," according to the psalmist, not only discount or ignore God but believe they are self-made – what they have and what they can do is solely the result of their own work. Their mantra is: "God helps those who help themselves;" assuming that God is just as happy to not be bothered with such trivial human matters.

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God....'" It is said "the three great apostles of practical atheism are wealth, health and power." (Charles Colton; *Webster's Dict. Of Quotable Defs.*; p.32) In the story of David, we see how easy it is to take the slippery slope from humility to arrogance. David began as a lowly shepherd boy, sought out and anointed by God to be king of Israel. It was God who protected David in battle; it was God who eliminated his enemies; and it was God who promised to make David's name renowned among all peoples. (Samuel. 7)

Last week, David was so grateful to God for all that God had done for him that he intended to build God a magnificent house of cedar – one that God didn't want – but you can't blame David for trying. His heart was in the right place. Time passes, and now we see a different side of David – one that became used to the power, authority and privilege that comes with being king – one corrupted by "misplaced priorities and misguided behavior."

In the *Upper Room Disciplines* for this week, Jorge Acevedo says David got lazy: During the spring of the year when kings go out to battle – David stayed home letting his army do the dirty work. (Samuel 11:1) In a moment of leisurely boredom, David catches a roof-top glance of a beautiful woman across the way bathing. “A glimpse turns into a stare...” and the stare turns to lust (*URD*; p. 217) and all his devotion to God goes down the drain with the bath water in a tale of murder and intrigue.

“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God....’” David did not wake up one morning and say to himself, “Today, I am going to make the biggest mistake of my life. Today I will not only ruin my life, I will take down the innocents around me.” What the psalmist calls foolishness in Psalm 14, others call wickedness or sin – placing oneself and one’s personal desire ahead of what’s right and just in the sight of God. (*NIB*: Psalms; p. 731)

It’s what our society teaches us to value: autonomy, self-direction, and self-sufficiency. (*Ibid.*) We don’t need other people and we don’t need God – until something really bad happens, then we see the error of our ways; then we turn to God; then we become a supportive community for one another – at least for a while. As we *Whistle a Happy Tune*, the song says, “the results of this [communal] deception are very plain to see” – and it’s not pretty: poverty, hunger,

homelessness and the violence that plagues our cities and this world – often done in God’s name.

We’ve heard the retorts: “If I can make it the hard way, so can they!” “Nobody bailed me out of a jam....” “If they just managed their resources better, they’d be okay.” “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people.” And of course, “God helps those who help themselves.” All of which are totally antithetical to everything Jesus stood – and died – for.

“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God....’” The story of Jesus feeding the multitudes is the only miracle story found in all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark include it twice each. (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-39; Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17 – *New Interpreter’s Bible*: vol. ix; p. 593) Details differ: Sometimes there are four thousand people, sometimes five thousand – sometimes there are seven loaves, sometimes five; sometimes two fish, sometimes a few fish; but the outcome is always the same: Everyone eats and is satisfied with plenty left over. It’s a miracle!

But before we get to another happy ending, there are more than a few anxious moments for the disciples: In John’s gospel, when he sees the crowd coming toward him, Jesus asks Philip: “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” There was no *Seven-Eleven* or *Nice ’N’ Easy* – besides, six months wages wouldn’t be enough to provide even a little sustenance for so large a crowd. But, John says, this was a test (6:5-6) and Philip took the bait: How can we possibly feed all these people?

John’s gospel paints a picture of Jesus who, at the height of his earthly ministry, had reached a sort of “rock-star” status in much of Palestine. His miracles amazed the masses; his sermons could silence a crowd. Those who heard and experienced his ministry believed he was the “real deal.” They wanted to make him king – even if it meant using force to do so. (John 6:15) His compassion for those who were hungry or in need of healing was known in every place he went. It’s no wonder that crowds of people followed him from place to place. (*Homiletics*; J/A ’09; p. 27-8)

“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God....’” Just because Jesus asked the question doesn’t mean that he expected Philip to provide the solution – but Philip should have known that Jesus was the solution. John says that Jesus knew what he was going to do; but did Philip remember – after all those other miracles – what Jesus was able to do?

Philip assumed that it was the disciples’ responsibility alone – Jesus, somehow, was left out of the equation.

“Fools say in their hearts....” How easy it is for us to leave God and Jesus out of the equations of our lives. Oh, we don’t do it on purpose – or consciously. We just do it! We do it:

- When like David, our personal desires and wants overshadow God’s purpose for our lives – and sometimes, God’s laws. There is truth to the adage about “living simply so that others might simply live.”
- When we forget that we are not self-made and that who we are and the abilities we have are the results of the labor and support of family, friends and teachers we have known over the years. We carry within us a little bit of everyone who has touched our lives – and it is our call to pay it forward.
- When, like Philip, we as individuals, as a community, or as the church assume we have to shoulder responsibilities alone because we are too proud or too afraid to ask for help. “Many hands do make light work.”
- When we allow our busyness to consume our spiritual lives. When work, or hobbies, or organizations take precedence over our time with God. Even Jesus needed to get away from it all now and then.
- When, like St. Paul, we can’t admit to ourselves that: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do,” (Romans 7:19) When we are unable to trust in God’s grace and goodness and leave no room for God to transform us into the people God knows we can be.

“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” We know better! But let us be mindful of those times when “practical” atheism can creep into our hearts and let our prayer be that of the modern day psalmist: “Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;

naught be all else to me save that thou art.  
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
waking or sleeping thy presence my light.”

(UMH 451)

Amen and amen.