

The World Is Not Enough

From the series: The God Question

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:11; I Timothy 6:17; Luke 12:21

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In this interim between my return from vacation and the beginning of Lent, I have been mulling over with you the question of God, the question of God that will not go away, remarking about the fact that God is alive and well on planet Earth, and rather surprisingly so, because, as I have indicated a time or two, it would have seemed at mid-century that the obituary of God was in order and, indeed, there were those radical theologians who spoke of the death of God. And, in the dark horror of the Nazi prison camps, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had spoken of man come of age, about edging God out of the world, and Harvey Cox wrote his best-selling book, *The Secular City*, which celebrated secularity and life lived on a horizontal plane, and as a theologian, tried to find traces of God, footprints of God in the secular city. And now here, having entered into the 21st century, we find that there is indication everywhere that religion is strong and vital and the question of God simply will not go away. It is a surprise.

Sigmund Freud, to whom I referred last week, who may be the epitome of modernity, modern scientific thinking, was convinced that science and religion were mortal enemies and that religion had to be cleared out in order for the human society to come into its maturity and live by its reason, by its intellect, putting away its wishful thinking and its superstitions, the superstitions that abound in all of the religions and that have been a big part of the origin of religion. But, Freud was wrong. Not that religion had not fought for 300 years a losing intellectual battle, but rather, that the human being can live out of his or her mind alone, that intellect is enough, that if we could only rid ourselves of our religion and our superstitious ways, we could live out of the intellect by reason, and thus come to maturity.

That hasn't proven to be the case. The God question just simply doesn't go away because, contrary to what Freud expected, our problem is not knowledge, but it is something far deeper: the intuition of a deeper reality. We have knowledge. We are awash in knowledge, and the super-information highway runs right to our laptop and personal computers at our side. We have a command of knowledge of

the modern world, of the universe, of society, and of our own human being far surpassing the possibility of ever taking it in, and it's all right there at our fingertips. But, knowledge in itself is not the answer. Simply to describe what is doesn't deal with its meaning, its significance, those ultimate existential questions about *whence have I come* and *whither am I going*, and *is this all there is*, and *what is the meaning of it all*? Those are religious questions and they are of another sort than the knowledge that is the consequence of the use of the intellect, the rational processes of our mind.

Someone just gave \$350 million to MIT for the study of the brain. Wonderful! The brain is a great mystery and there's a tremendous amount of investigative focus on the brain. But, once we have come to be able to describe the brain fully, it's still not synonymous with understanding of that mental activity which is touched with Spirit which probes a deeper layer than that which is available to empirical investigation and research.

We have knowledge aplenty. We can know the whole world, but the world is not enough, nor is the world that we can possess.

Aren't you somewhat amazed at the wealth that is around today? The wealth that is everywhere, it seems, and even the least of us are among the wealthy of the world, and who of us has to deny ourselves very much in the way of creature comfort or pleasure or toys or globe-trotting to exotic places? We are bombarded, day by day, with the seduction of saying that one more trip or one more toy will make it all right. There was a study out last week that said 16 minutes and 43 seconds of every hour you watch television is given over to consumerism, making of us materialists, acquisitors.

Robert Bellah, the American sociologist, wrote something that I jotted down the moment my eye fell on it, something to the effect that to secure happiness by material acquisition is denied by every religion and philosophy known to humankind, and yet it is preached on every American television set. Pleasure. Toys. Adventures. Wasn't that second chapter of Ecclesiastes taken as a script from our own contemporary life? The king who indulged himself without limits, denied himself nothing that his heart set itself upon, who ended up with his famous phrase, "Vanity, all is vanity," which has been translated also "Absurdity, all is absurdity," or emptiness, chasing the wind, because you can have it all and have nothing, because the world is not enough.

The writer of the letter to Timothy says the same thing, warning those of us who are rich in this world not to be haughty or to set our hope on uncertain riches, but rather, on God.

We find the same point being made in the Gospel lesson where one comes to Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute. Jesus declines and then tells a story about the farmer who prospered so greatly that he tore down his barns and built bigger ones, laying up enough store so he could relax and pursue his pleasure.

If Jesus had been in Naples this winter, he might have spoken not of barns, but of homes with a view. All along South Gulf Shore Blvd., houses are being torn down in order to build great, palatial residences. Obvious prosperity is everywhere, yet I get the impression we are more driven, more frenzied and under greater stress than ever.

My Sony stock took a big hike this week. It's wonderful. I thought of how much more I could give to Christ Community. Twenty-three points, I think, and I wondered why until on the world news last night I noticed that Play Station Two is coming out. I didn't know there was Play Station One. I hadn't gotten beyond my grandchildren's Gameboys, but apparently there was Play Station One and now coming out in Japan is Play Station Two. Thousands of people sat up all night in the bone-chilling cold in Japan in order to be in line to get one of the two million Play Stations available on opening day. Stores had signs that they were sold out before they could open the doors. There was a frenzy of activity, and I watched as the people were playing these things. They were absolutely out of this world, playing with such intensity. This is not just a game. I don't understand it, but it apparently is like having in the palm of your hand a connection to everything you'd ever want to be connected to in the whole world. They interviewed one young lady who had a smile on her face and said, "Oh, I just love it. I couldn't live without it." And all the Play Stations in the world won't fill the hole in the soul or give one a peaceful heart.

The question of God won't go away, and in our day we have such possibilities, endless learning, limitless pleasure, toys galore, the whole world to travel, but the scriptures which are ancient sound like they were written yesterday when they remind us that a life not built on God is a life that will ultimately unravel and come apart.

It used to be easier to preach about this kind of stuff. I don't do this very much. Probably because it's more difficult now because God isn't some super-human person just above the sky. God isn't some King Almighty who is turning the gears of the universe and pulling the strings of people. God is not that external deity that runs things and rules things. When God was that for me, I knew how to tell you how to please and appease that God. And, with a sermon like this, particularly if you just bought a new lot with a view and planned to tear down the house on it and build a new one, you'd go out of here with guilt so heavy it would probably take you another seven days to recover.

The pulpit traditionally in the church has been wonderfully eloquent in the imposition of guilt, crabby about people who have done well, who are successful, who are having a good time in life. That's not the point. I don't quite know how to do it with a conception of God so radically altered, as it is for me, and I think for many of you. It's not to please or appease some external ruler who holds us accountable and is ready to call in our guilt, but, how do we live with a God that is not outside, but inside? How do we live in harmony with a God who is the

inexhaustible ground and source of all being, that creative Spirit within the process, this process, this cosmic process of 15 billion years that has been unfolding and developing and emerging, of which we are a part, out of which we have emerged, we who are the outposts of Spirit, as it were, we who have come to consciousness and awareness, who are the containers of Spirit, who allow Spirit voice, who are able to be conscious of the wonder of it all, the amazement of this whole fantastic drama, and we are a part of it? How do we live with a God-consciousness of the God who is not threatening just beyond the blue, but who is part and parcel of the process itself within us, the Spirit that would come to expression through us?

Isn't it a matter of becoming comfortable in our own skin? Isn't it a matter of being at home in the world? Isn't it to find delight in being a part of the whole, wonderful process?

Knowledge isn't the problem; it's just not the answer. And wealth isn't the problem, except if we've set our heart on it. But, all things are ours to enjoy if we come to the consciousness of God who is, once again, the inexhaustible ground of all being, that present Spirit that energizes all and enlivens all, that God who calls us to know ourselves, and I wonder, finally, if I would come to know myself, would that be to know God? And I don't know how to tell you to do it; some of you would do it, perhaps, with me, in a class where we'd go at it in an intellectual fever. Some of you could better walk the Labyrinth with Toni. All of us need to pause now and again and hear the questions of our existence which are the questions that are the voice of God, to be still and know that God is God, and if God is God and I live in that awareness, then all will be well. All manner of things will be well.