

The Simplicity of Faith in the Gracious God

Second sermon in the series: What the Church Has Forgotten, AA Remembers

Text: Mark 9:23-24: "I believe; help my unbelief."

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
July 18, 1982

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Once you accept the existence of God - however you define Him, however you explain your relationship to Him - then you are caught forever with His presence in the center of all things. You are also caught with the fact that man is a creature who walks in two worlds and traces upon the walls of his cave the wonders and the nightmare experiences of his spiritual pilgrimage.

So declares Morris West in a preparatory note to his bestselling novel *The Clowns of God*. I think Alcoholics Anonymous would subscribe to that statement. They would appreciate the simple statement of the existence of God without an attempt carefully to define the nature of God with exactitude. They would agree, as well, that the acceptance of the existence of God has profound implications for our lives. And I think they would identify with this idea of human existence as being a very mixed bag - that humankind walks in two worlds: a world full of wonder and a world of nightmare experience.

In this second message of the series, "What the Church Has Forgotten, AA Remembers," we move to Step Two of the AA program for a recovering alcoholic. Let me repeat what I said last week: I speak of AA not simply to publicize it, although I am greatly impressed with this fine organization. Neither am I concerned in these messages with the use of alcohol per se. Rather, I wish to use the AA program to illustrate the biblical truths which constitute God's method of human transformation, for I believe what AA has discovered and put effectively into practice is nothing new but rather the simple application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What the Church too often only talks about, AA practices, and the persons who have been helped and healed are legion.

In the first message we addressed the question of control - "Who is in charge?" Step One of the AA program is the admission that one's life is out of control - "Our lives had become unmanageable." I suggested last week that to the profound realization, "I need help!", comes the obvious question, "Is there someone who can help?" That is what Step Two is all about.

We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

That may sound like a highly religious statement from an organization that claims it is not religious - and it is not, but its principles are spiritual in nature and at this very early stage the person who has come to the conviction that he is helpless, that his life is unmanageable, is confronted with the suggestion that there is a Power greater than himself and that this Power holds the key to recovery, to the return to sanity, to wholeness.

Is there someone who can help?

AA says Yes, and suggests that all that is necessary to encounter that Power - however defined - is an open mind, a mind open to faith, to faith that God exists.

Once again, we are only at the beginning. Step Two points to the existence of a higher Power. Not until Step Three do we deal with trust or commitment. AA does not move too rapidly, expecting giant steps. What is necessary once one has said, "I need help," is to come to believe that there is Someone Who can help and will help. Thus I entitle this message on Step Two, "The Simplicity of Faith in the Gracious God." Before one commits one's life to God, one must believe that He is and, before one who has come to the realization that he needs Someone beyond himself will be willing to commit himself, he must believe that that Someone is gracious, that the Power that is, is Grace.

There is a story in the Gospels that illustrates very well what AA understands by Step Two. Mark tells us of a man whose son was possessed by a spirit that made him speechless. It would from time to time dash him to the ground and throw him into a convulsive-like state. Whether the child suffered epilepsy or what precisely his situation was, we are not certain, nor does it matter. Let us simply recognize a situation of great human suffering and great human need.

The man brought the child to the disciples, but they were powerless to alleviate the child's distress. When Jesus came, the man came to him seeking his help, explaining the impotence of the disciples. Jesus inquired further about the child's condition and the father explained, concluding with the desperate plea,

"If it is at all possible for you, take pity upon us and help us."

There you have the situation - a life situation which reflects human suffering - a child whose life is bound in physical and mental and emotional anguish, a parent's anguish at the anguish of his child. In short, here we are back at Step One.

We admitted our lives were unmanageable. We admitted we were powerless.

It may be a physical ailment. It may be an emotional weakness. It may be the desperate plight of one dear to us. It may be the external circumstances of our

lives. Whatever breaks through the mask of our respectability, whatever wears thin the facade of our normalcy, whatever finally unhinges the floodgates by which we keep the raging sea at bay – sometime, somehow, somewhere, most of us come to recognize with profound conviction that we need help. As difficult as it is to get out the cry, finally we must say,

If it is at all possible, help us!

The response Jesus makes demonstrates that he was practicing the Twelve Step program long before AA inaugurated it. He said,

If it is possible! Everything is possible to one who has faith.

Certainly Jesus was triggering faith's mechanism, bringing to the Father's consciousness that which alone can appropriate God's power. That will not be possible which we do not believe possible. I do not think Jesus was saying that one who has faith will arbitrarily regard anything as possible but rather that, in a given situation, it is faith that is the response by virtue of which God makes His limitless power available.

What is faith here?

I do not think it is much more than open-mindedness to whatever Power there is. And this is precisely AA's suggestion. It is precisely here that the Church must be willing to learn again faith's simplicity. Jesus is not carefully defining faith, the nature of God and the conditions of the application of His power. He is rather calling for an attitude of openness, which will allow the power of God to operate.

Just as at Step One AA brings one to the consciousness of need but does not moralize or condemn, so here AA points to the source of help without feeling compelled to define that power and guard against misconception.

Jesus says, "If it is possible! Certainly it is possible if you are open to the possibility."

The response of the father is beautiful because it is so honest, so authentic, so free of pious cliché and mealy-mouthed evasion.

I believe; help my unbelief!

I love that. Perhaps I love that response so much because I have found that my response so often. And I suspect few statements in all of Scripture have given such comfort to struggling believers trying desperately to believe. The marvelous message of this passage is that such struggling faith, no more than an openness to the power of God, is enough to put us in touch with the Grace that heals and redeems.

The child was healed. And I suspect the minimal faith of the father grew to a profound confidence in the limitless power and grace of God.

This, of course, is precisely what happens in the experience of the alcoholic. At the point of having faith, alcoholics are no different than anyone else. Like the rest of us, they have multiple barriers to faith. Faith is not easy. It is always exercised as a risk. But for the alcoholic, there is a reality check, for in a desperate situation, to turn to a Power beyond themselves begins to effect a human transformation. And, as that transformation takes root, the minimal faith that is little more than openness to a gracious Power grows into a more mature faith which takes on the character of trust. But again that gets us beyond Step Two. In fact, that is precisely Step Three.

Let us stop with this simple faith in a gracious God for a moment - the faith that cries,

I believe; help thou my unbelief!

Let me make some observations. First of all, let me suggest that the *question of God's existence is not so much an intellectual question as an existential question*. It is not an academic matter but a life matter. It cannot be limited to a question of the head but is rather a question of the heart. Or perhaps better, it is not a question that touches only the mind but rather involves the whole person. The question of God pursued intellectually in calm and cool reflection is *interesting*, but it is not *serious*.

Now I must make a qualification lest I be misunderstood. I am not saying that we are not called upon to think clearly about the question of God nor that in our serious pursuit of the question of God we must not fully utilize our critical faculties. There is far too much mindless religion and the Church has been guilty far too often of ducking the hard questions, hiding behind a smokescreen of pious platitudes. There has too long been too much fearful response to the critique of faith, too much defensiveness against honest questions and too much condemnation of honest doubt.

Faith is not irrational. What is irrational is immoral to believe. God gave us minds to think clearly and if there is anything about which we ought to think clearly, it is the question of God and the faith of the Church. In fact, if we fail to think clearly about the faith, it is not to our credit but rather betrays the fact that we do not really believe at all.

As much as anyone in our time, Hans Küng is carrying on this critical dialogue with the Christian tradition. In his book *Does God Exist?* He investigates the question of God as it has been addressed in the last four centuries. Beginning with the father of modern philosophy, Descartes, he traces the development of the God question. Küng compares and contrasts two seventeenth-century theologians, Descartes and Pascal, showing how the modern era began with

Descartes' systematic doubt of everything he believed until he found certainty only in his own existence – the fact that it was he, himself, who was thinking. "I think; therefore I am." This at least he could not doubt. From this small block of certainty he began to build the structure of knowledge.

Pascal was critical of Descartes. He was a brilliant mathematician and scientist, but he recognized the fact that human reason could not be the gauge of reality or truth. Pascal's famous dictum expressed that well - "The heart has reasons the reason cannot know." Not cool, rational reflection, but a passionate pursuit of the truth and reason by the whole person was the way to the truth for Pascal. He declared the problem to be not intellectual certainty, but rather existential security.

From these two thinkers - both incidentally Christian - can be traced a fascinating development of critical rationality as it has been applied to the question of God.

That history of thought has led to the modern problem of God and the serious question of the existence of God, and Küng engages in the ongoing debate, indicating that he is convinced that all of our rational powers should be involved in this problem. But his research convinces him that the question of God's existence cannot finally be solved by human reason but rather calls for a decision of the will, a leap of faith if you will, not in the face of rational evidence but in the full light of rational evidence.

Thus Küng would agree with the observation made above that the question of God cannot be solved by a detached academic pursuit but only by a passionate, existential quest.

The roots of modern atheism, according to Küng, lie not in the amazing development and success of natural science and the emancipation of human reason from the shackles of superstition and traditionalism, but much rather in the alienation of the masses from the faith, due to the Church's inability to open itself and its dogma to the findings of science, as well as the Church's failure to address the sociopolitical problems that followed in the wake of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Rather than aiding and abetting the cause of human liberation and humanization, the Church aligned itself with princes and powers of established order. When revolution came, the Church was on the wrong side, identified with the power of oppression rather than on the side of liberation. When the Church as institution was rejected, so was the faith of the Church and the God Whom the Church claimed to worship.

There you have the roots of modern atheism. In the cause of human liberation, the leading spirits of the last centuries have had to take a stand against the traditionalism of the Church. To be pro-human they were forced to be anti-God. You can trace a fascinating thread of thought through Ludwig Feuerbach, who claimed God was but a human projection, Karl Marx, who saw God as a consolation serving vested interests, Sigmund Freud, who claimed God was but

an infantile illusion – all leading to the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche who declared, "God is dead and we have killed him!" And we are not yet done with these thinkers and the problems they raised and the questions they put.

But Küng has rendered a great service in helping us to understand where we are and how we got there. He has also demonstrated, I believe, what I said above - the question of God must not only be answered; it must be answered out of the total human situation, out of our existential situation. For the question of God engages the whole person in his life situation, not just his head in splendid isolation.

This brings me to a second observation: *the question of God will most often arise in a situation of crisis.*

We have seen that in the program of AA. Step Two - openness to a Power beyond oneself follows Step One - life discovered to be unmanageable. This was the case in our Gospel lesson: a parent in anguish over the distress of his child.

I think we would all testify to the fact that it is in the wrenching of the soul that we cry out, "Is there Someone Who can help?" This is the origin of the charge that religion is for the weak, for those who fail to find in themselves the resources to cope with life's harsh reality.

Do we have any defense against this charge? Not really. It is certainly true that it is most often in our extremity that God has His opportunity. But if we agree that human existence is fraught with peril and painful at best, then what are the alternatives to resting in the Lord? Gritting one's teeth and flying in the face of the pain? Cynicism and bitterness that corrode and poison the human spirit? Despair? Cursing the darkness?

Feuerbach denied the existence of God, seeing Him as a projection of our need. God is not, but we have created Him out of our need for Someone to help in our helplessness.

That is a possible explanation. In fact, I am afraid in far too many cases that is all God is to us - a combination of a super Santa Claus and Granddaddy created out of our craven fear and wanton desires.

But that is not the only possible explanation. It could be that Augustine was right when he said...

Thou hast created us for Thyself and our hearts are restless til they find their rest in Thee.

It could be that God created us to find our security and our foundation in Him. It could be that life is unmanageable, that we are played upon by forces and pressures and tides not of our own making nor under our control. It could be that

only One beyond us can provide for us a solid ground for our lives and that it is His intention that in the perilous vicissitudes of life we find our rest and peace in Him. Perhaps there is Someone to help, a Power available if only we would open our lives to it.

That brings me to a third observation. It is the testimony of the centuries; it is the witness of every recovering alcoholic; it is the experience of every truly religious person: *all that is required is the simplicity of faith in the Gracious God.*

Again, there are depths of faith to be plumbed; there is a profundity of true Christian experience to be probed, but the transforming, liberating, redeeming grace and power of God are available to the one who can in honesty say no more than,

"Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief!"

I submit to you that that is amazing and marvelous. All God asks is that we throw down our weapons of defensiveness, our arguments and the barrier to belief we have erected. All God asks is openness to a dimension of reality beyond us, openness to a Power that transcends us, openness to a Grace that can heal us.

Oh, I confess the sins of the Church. Too often we have encrusted the simple invitation of the Gospel with the baggage of our traditions and the burden of our dogma. We have thought it our duty to guard God and Truth through our careful definition and we have demanded not the simplicity of faith but whole systems of doctrine, most of which have never been through the refining fires of modern critical reflection.

And I confess another sin. In the Church we have demanded conformity to our narrow conception of the moral life, most of which has precious little to do with morality, a conception of morality which majors on the peripheral matters and neglects the heart of the matter: love and justice and truth.

But God must not be rejected even though the Church has offered only a distorted glimpse of Him, for to reject Him is to reject the only Power that can save us, heal us and make us whole. Only God can help us, transforming our nightmare experiences into experiences of wonder as He heeds our cry of simple faith and leads us into the expansiveness of Grace.

Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief!