None of the Above: The Spiritual But not Religious People and Why I honor them, sort of

Sermon Preached by
Rev. Donna Schaper
Senior Minister, Judson Memorial Church
at
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church,
Rensselaerville, New York
August 25, 2013

Scriptures:

Mishnah 1: 1: These are the things that can't be measured. Giving the first fruits of the field to the poor, the love of Torah, and the Keeping of Sabbath.

Habbakuk 2:2: Make the Way Plain

The latest language for doubters is sociological. NONES means "none of the above." It is an answer to the question about religious persuasion. Many NONES also call themselves "spiritual but not religious." I have the deepest respect for both self-namings. Finally, someone is unwilling to lie about God! The authenticity of the doubter is clear. They refuse to fake important things. The old-fashioned word for this behavior is "sincere." In a world that abounds with spin and irony, such sincerity matters. Some NONES are also dismayed. By dismayed I mean they can't abide what religion has done to perjure itself, in wars, stupidity, and self-righteousness and intellectual laziness.

I like NONES because they aren't willing to be phony about important things. The great majority of my mixed-up congregation call themselves "Spiritual but Not Religious." 10 percent of us are Jews; an easy 30 percent are agnostics; 10 percent atheists; and the other half half-believing in at least thirty different varieties of theology. Some never left John Wesley and Methodism, others wish we Baptists were more Episcopalian but put up with us anyway; the United Church of Christ people are half Unitarian. Half of this half-believing 50 percent are recovering Catholics and describe themselves that way. I demur, saying that Catholicism is a great religion; one I was taught to hate growing up as a Lutheran. We are so mixed-up that we can't even describe ourselves as a smorgasbord. We are a full-service cafeteria.

My gripe with the name "NONES" is that it says what we are not. "None of the above" is plenty honest and sincere, and it is also pretty negative. What I like about my people is that we are "some of the above" in different dosages. They push me hard to say what we are for, not what we are against. Here I tell you what little we are for, as a way to pry open the dismay about the harm religion does.

You'd be surprised how many people there are who pay their dues to one flavor of Christianity or Judaism or Islam who don't buy the whole package. Many believers also quietly refuse to be hypocritical about faith. They are most like the people who won't tell you who they vote for. They are pretty sure about very little—except that there has to be more than one route to the Holy. We are absolutely sure that there is no one name for God.

Religion is "just" the decision to be bound to one people and one text. Spiritual is just the sense that there is a way to live life, a path to choose, and an attempt to walk that path. Why inflate either any more than that? What is wrong with faith the size of a mustard seed?

Measurement is very important. Before we go on to understand this text about immeasurability, let's make sure we understand that immeasurability is not the enemy of measurement but instead its accomplice in the making of what is good really good.

Measurement is important. Consider dosage. Get the dose wrong and the medicine can turn into poison. Substitute two cups of salt for two cups of sugar, as I did in a spice cake last Christmas, and people who usually regard you highly and warmly will say really mean things, like what the hell did you do to the spice cake? Measurement is important.

Some of you may not know that Warren, my partner's, current project is called Energy Points. He is partnering with an Israeli entrepreneur, as a writer, to help a wonderful start-up business measure how to really help the environment. Should you recycle, buy light bulbs, drive less, use more plastic, use less plastic, all of the above—and if you can only do three of those things, which will be best to do? The calorie is an energy point, which allows us to measure food, which is a big help when it doesn't drive you crazy.

My friend who is on the cover of our bulletin today is an organic farmer who has moved to the corner of the organic movement, from which position he takes pot shots at Whole Foods and the rest of the so-called organic movement. He thinks their measurements are false. I respect his point of view and wish I could be half as radical or grizzled as he is. I also wonder why a little more organic is not better than a lot of purity in the soil. I am vexed by more than one measurement and profoundly vexed by measurement controversies, whether they are in the organic movement or in revolutions that go wrong in the Middle East because people don't know how to name victory. What measurement gives us is a way to stop. This much democracy and this much power is enough. That much democracy and that much power is not enough. Naming what you want and being able to measure it is utterly key to revolutions, to movements, to congregations and to people. Some people call this a theory of change. I call it knowing what you want and knowing how to see it when it arrives.

Price is also a big word. It is an economic measure that matters to us just about every day a dozen times. We love to show off our bargains. Someone says a kind word about our dress, and we respond, self-diminuating, "I got it on sale, off the rack." Or we find a good restaurant, where the food is superb, the service even better, the ambiance in rivalry for the pre-existing excellences, and when we tell other people about it, we don't brag about how much we did pay for such worthy worth. We often say that we "got a deal." Price is a big word. The only bigger word is its opposite, priceless.

Measurements are good things, and immeasurability is also a good thing. Price is a good mechanism, and the only better mechanism is pricelessness. Robert Bellah, the great sociologist of religion who just died, said that religion was nothing more or less than the imagination of another reality. The poet Paul Eluard said that there is another reality and that it is right here. We can measure the world while knowing that our experience of it is immeasurable.

Which brings me back to the text. This text is actually in the form of a Mishnah, or a commentary on Torah. It begins with the Rabbis exhorting the people to understand what the Torah means—and to respect so highly the learning of Torah that nothing compares in importance. Not farming, not even taking care of the poor. Learning what the Torah means is an act of such great force and power that its force and power are immeasurable.

But clearly the people wanted a measure. They wanted to know how much Torah was good enough. They also wanted to know how much they should give to the poor. The people, faced with that second reality that is right here within the first, the heaven that exists in the earth, we might say,

wanted measurements for the immeasurable. And so, the Mishnah goes on to say that the people should give a corner of their life to learning Torah and (we didn't read it all today) at least 1/60th of their fruits to the poor. The translation is to give the poor at least one corner of the land and to give the Torah at least the Sabbath, one day, for its attention. The Rabbis were forced to give specific instructions in religious behavior to people who just couldn't comprehend the immeasurable. The rabbis faced what revolutionaries face along with people who go on diets. If I want to weigh x number of pounds, I have to eat x number of calories for x number of days. Then I can declare victory. If I want to have freedom, I need to declare it with x number of people from the Muslim Brotherhood and x number of people from elsewhere, and when I get there, I name victory. The Rabbis gave the people an ethical answer to the religious problem of immeasurability. A corner of your field. A day a week of your time. This is victory for you.

Secretly, though, I think the Rabbis knew that the regulations, even the best of measurements, were not enough. I think they knew that something had to happen within the reality of prices and measurements to challenge their domination. Call it the Spirit of the Law if you want. Or call it living from the corner of here and now, while also having the vision of there and then. Call it being somebody who is so acquainted with the truth of Torah—and gospel—that we know the poor don't get just a corner. The poor, in God's eyes, get the whole field. The love of learning doesn't just get the certification of the MBA. It gets the uncertifiable beach reading or the love some of us have for a long leisurely read of The New York Times.

Christians used to speak often of Jesus as the one who paid the price for our salvation. We don't much any more, now that we understand salvation to be more "plenia gratia," full of grace, than full of recrimination. We imagine another kind of theology, where the universe became imbalanced and the Cosmic Christ restored balance by buying and paying outside of the mechanics of the price point. There was no price large enough that could ever be paid to restore creation to its original glory. So Jesus went to the mat for the glory, showed that it was worth even more than the powerful worth of his own life. He showed the authorities what creation was worth. They preferred to get a bargain. Jesus died to say that there is a worth beyond the worth of what anyone can pay. He made a statement, a new balance sheet, and an infusion into the credit card account that was overdrawn. The power he used was love, which is the tie that binds this reality of the slightly organic field and its sticker price with the full loam of powerful soil, never destroyed by the people who want to get a bargain out of our food.

Think of the last great meal you had and how you bragged about how little you had to pay for it. Think outside the deal, beyond the bargain, beyond paying off the poor with a corner. When you do that, you have moved into that other reality, which is also right here. That great meal that we got for $30.00 prix fixe when its true value to our spirits and our souls was at least thrice that. Not to mention what we would like to have given that waiter for a tip. You do get what you pay for—and if you pay in the coin of immeasurable gratitude you have already moved into heaven.

We have just been in France, having one of those nearby cultural experiences, which makes a better person if it doesn't bankrupt you. We exchanged our New York apartment and car for their apartment and car in Nice. Really good deal all the way around. Incommensurate in value and not needing to be weighed. Was their apartment as nice as ours? No. Did their apartment have beets growing in the back yard? No. Did ours have a view? No. Pricing didn't matter. We really liked the people. They had fun. We had fun. We each got a deal.

When it came time to fill up their car with gasoline, we got into another one of those French robotic experiences, all of which happen in French. Now Warren's French is really good. But it doesn't do robots. We had hilarious times trying to rent the bikes. Took four calls to Verizon to make

it happen. Why? Because it did. We were a complete joke on the A8 trying to pay the toll, so much so that a lovely French woman rolled down her window and gave us the money, after we had backed up traffic for way too long. The French are not a patient people. But the gas business took the cake. Believe me when I say we did not get a deal.

First of all, we paid for the woman's gas in front of us. And not our own. It was a simple enough mistake. You give the man in the booth your credit card, he thinks you are pump number 7, you are pump number 7 but you haven't pumped any gas yet. Thus, we paid for her gas. 66 euros was the price. At what amounts to $12.00 per gallon for gas, here in France, we were already nervous about paying for our own gas. It had taken us deep into the Calanques that finger the Mediterranean, making lime quarries to dress up the blue and the green of the water with the grey of the stones. What we had experienced was so beautiful that I was willing to pay for her gas and for mine. But we got the payment issue straightened out in a bout of French that cornered all of us. And I don't mean the corner office where we came out on top. But the worst thing was that we bought the wrong gas at $12.00 a gallon. We bought her gas, and that was bad enough because the man in the booth had no idea how to resolve the problem. Plus our antagonist, the lady with the 66 euros debt to the gas company, which we paid, was angry that her gas had cost so much. Really angry. And she wasn't going to pay.

But then we did the deed. Instead of filling up our friend's car with diesel, which it uses, we filled it up with petrol, which it does not. I need to make sure you understand that he had become a friend. A very generous friend. He had invited us for drinks one evening. Just a little aperitif, he had said. Six hours and ten courses later, we stumbled home. Actually, he drove us home. Warren, whose French is very good, was in no condition to move. Sometimes things just go wrong. They don't mean to go wrong. They just do. And when that happens, another kind of immeasurability is needed. Forgiveness. Joined by payment of the debt to the damaged car of your good friend who only did one kindness after another for you. If the Jesus way is to overdose the universe with love to restore it, another part of it is to be ready to take responsibility for your mistakes. To pay the price of them, as it were, and to restore relationship. Often, what is tangled on our tongue is the sentence that could change your next day. Speaking that sentence is what gets us out of the corner of the field and lets us live a whole life, not just 1/60th of it. We move to the corner office when we brighten the corner where we are with something immeasurable, something that allows us to give away the whole field rather than hang on to 59/60th of it. How does that transition happen? It happens by moving out of the field of measurement into the immeasurable field. Rumi's great quote comes to mind. There is a field beyond right and wrong. Come on out, I'll meet you there.

Those of us who know corners know what this means. We know what it means to be cornered and not to know how to get out. The immeasurable action of forgiveness—of us forgiving those who wronged us or of receiving forgiveness—is another way of saying that measurement and repentance and paying off our mistakes is good. But even better is the restoration of right relationship. Michelle, our friend, has been extraordinarily forgiving. We are still wondering how we could have been so stupid.

You probably have heard the joke the Catskill Borsch Belt comedian tells. He decides to do a good turn to the sick and goes to the hospital to visit some very sick people. He signs up to go weekly, giving 1/60th of his field to virtue. He tells all his jokes. The sick guy is not laughing. Finally, he gives up and just says, "I hope you get better." The man rises and says, "I hope you do too." I so hope you can enjoy bargains this week. And that you can do your best to manage calories and energy points and eat organic and do the right thing by the poor. I hope even more that you can do so with gladness and gratitude, love and forgiveness, and that you can forget to even try to measure those things. And if the car takes diesel, give it diesel. Or better put, know what the real source of

your life's energy is, that it is in love and forgiveness and their utterly immeasurable power, living right here inside this reality, alongside the one we can measure. Amen.

This is a synopsis of a very popular CNN essay, "Why I Raise my Children without God." 1/14/13 by Deborah Mitchell.

God is a bad parent and role model.

If God is our father, then he is not a good parent. Good parents don't allow their children to inflict harm on others. Good people don't stand by and watch horrible acts committed against innocent men, women and children. They don't condone violence and abuse. "He has given us free will," you say? Our children have free will, but we still step in and guide them.

God is not logical.

How many times have you heard, "Why did God allow this to happen?" And this: "It's not for us to understand." Translate: We don't understand, so we will not think about it or deal with the issue. Take for example the senseless tragedy in Newtown. Rather than address the problem of guns in America, we defer responsibility to God. He had a reason. He wanted more angels. Only he knows why. We write poems saying that we told God to leave our schools. Now he's making us pay the price. If there is a good, all-knowing, all-powerful God who loves his children, does it make sense that he would allow murders, child abuse, wars, brutal beatings, torture and millions of heinous acts to be committed throughout the history of mankind? Doesn't this go against everything Christ taught us in the New Testament?

The question we should be asking is this: "Why did we allow this to happen?" How can we fix this? No imaginary person is going to give us the answers or tell us why. Only we have the ability to be logical and to problem solve, and we should not abdicate these responsibilities to "God" just because a topic is tough or uncomfortable to address.

God is not fair.

If God is fair, then why does he answer the silly prayers of some while allowing other, serious requests, to go unanswered? I have known people who pray that they can find money to buy new furniture. (Answered.) I have known people who pray to God to help them win a soccer match. (Answered.) Why are the prayers of parents with dying children not answered?

If God is fair, then why are some babies born with heart defects, autism, missing limbs or conjoined to another baby? Clearly, all men are not created equally. Why is a good man beaten senseless on the street while an evil man finds great wealth taking advantage of others? This is not fair. A game maker who allows luck to rule mankind's existence has not created a fair game.

God does not protect the innocent.

He does not keep our children safe. As a society, we stand up and speak for those who cannot. We protect our little ones as much as possible. When a child is kidnapped, we work together to find the child. We do not tolerate abuse and neglect. Why can't God, with all his powers of omnipotence, protect the innocent?

God is not present.

He is not here. Telling our children to love a person they cannot see, smell, touch or hear does not make sense. It means that we teach children to love an image, an image that lives only in their

imaginations. What we teach them, in effect, is to love an idea that we have created, one that is based in our fears and our hopes.

God Does Not Teach Children to Be Good

A child should make moral choices for the right reasons. Telling him that he must behave because God is watching means that his morality will be externally focused rather than internally structured. It's like telling a child to behave or Santa won't bring presents. When we take God out of the picture, we place responsibility of doing the right thing onto the shoulders of our children. No, they won't go to heaven or rule their own planets when they die, but they can sleep better at night. They will make their family proud. They will feel better about who they are. They will be decent people.

God Teaches Narcissism

"God has a plan for you." Telling kids there is a big guy in the sky who has a special path for them makes children narcissistic; it makes them think the world is at their disposal and that, no matter what happens, it doesn't really matter because God is in control. That gives kids a sense of false security and creates selfishness. "No matter what I do, God loves me and forgives me. He knows my purpose. I am special." The irony is that, while we tell this story to our kids, other children are abused and murdered, starved and neglected. All part of God's plan, right?

When we raise kids without God, we tell them the truth—we are no more special than the next creature. We are just a very, very small part of a big, big machine–whether that machine is nature or society–the influence we have is minuscule. The realization of our insignificance gives us a true sense of humbleness.

I understand why people need God. I understand why people need heaven. It is terrifying to think that we are all alone in this universe, that one day we—along with the children we love so much—will cease to exist. The idea of God and an afterlife gives many of us structure, community and hope.

I do not want religion to go away. I only want religion to be kept at home or in church where it belongs. It's a personal effect, like a toothbrush or a pair of shoes. It's not something to be used or worn by strangers. I want my children to be free not to believe and to know that our schools and our government will make decisions based on what is logical, just and fair—not on what they believe an imaginary God wants.

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED GUEST COLUMNIST

Belief Is the Least Part of Faith

Some Sundays ago, I was part of a sermon in my university's church. It was the kind of ecumenical church in which I'd grown up. The minister and I sat on the proscenium above the congregation and below the stained-glass windows, and spoke about the ways that evangelical Christians understood God — a subject on which I had written a book. Afterward, there was a lunch open to the community. The questions people asked as we ate our avocado-and-cheese sandwiches circled around the puzzle of belief. Why do people believe in God? What is our evidence that there is an invisible agent who has a real impact on our lives? How can those people be so confident?

These are the questions that university-educated liberals ask about faith. They are deep questions. But they are also abstract and intellectual. They are philosophical questions. In an evangelical church, the questions would probably have circled around how to feel God's love and how to be more aware of God's presence. Those are fundamentally practical questions.

You could imagine that if you were going to spend an hour or two each week fretting over one or the other, you might opt for the practical. This choice is more real for many evangelicals than most secular liberals imagine. Not all members of deeply theologically conservative churches — churches that seem to have such clear-cut rules about how people should behave and what they should believe — have made up their minds about whether God exists or how God exists. In a charismatic evangelical church I studied, people often made comments that suggested they had complicated ideas about God's realness. One devout woman said in a prayer group one evening: "I don't believe it, but I'm sticking to it. That's my definition of faith."

It was a flippant, off-the-cuff remark, but also a modern-day version of Pascal's wager: in the face of her uncertainty about God's existence, she decided that she was better off behaving as if God were real. She chose to foreground the practical issue of how to experience the world as if she was loved by a loving God and to put to one side her intellectual puzzling over whether and in what way the invisible agent was really there.

The role of belief in religion is greatly overstated, as anthropologists have long known. In 1912, Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern social science, argued that religion arose as a way for social groups to experience themselves as groups. He thought that when people experienced themselves in social groups they felt bigger than themselves, better, more alive — and that they identified that aliveness as something supernatural. Religious ideas arose to make sense of this experience of being part of something greater. Durkheim thought that belief was more like a flag than a philosophical position: You don't go to church because you believe in God; rather, you believe in God because you go to church.

In fact, you can argue that religious belief as we now conceptualize it is an entirely modern phenomenon. As the comparative religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out, when the King James Bible was printed in 1611, "to believe" meant something like "to hold dear." Smith, who died in 2000, once wrote: "The affirmation 'I believe in God' used to mean: 'Given the reality of God as a fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to Him my heart and soul. I committedly opt to live in loyalty to Him. I offer my life to be judged by Him, trusting His mercy.' Today the statement may be taken by some as meaning: 'Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as a fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is yes.' "

To be clear, I am not arguing that belief is not important to Christians. It is obviously important. But secular Americans often think that the most important thing to understand about religion is why people believe in God, because we think that belief precedes action and explains choice. That's part of our folk model of the mind: that belief comes first.

And that was not really what I saw after my years spending time in evangelical churches. I saw that people went to church to experience joy and to learn how to have more of it. These days I find that it is more helpful to think about faith as the questions people choose to focus on, rather than the propositions observers think they must hold.

If you can sidestep the problem of belief — and the related politics, which can be so distracting — it is easier to see that the evangelical view of the world is full of joy. God is good. The world is good. Things will be good, even if they don't seem good now. That's what draws people to church. It is understandably hard for secular observers to sidestep the problem of belief. But it is worth appreciating that in belief is the reach for joy, and the reason many people go to church in the first place.

T. M. Luhrmann, a professor of anthropology at Stanford and the author of "When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God," is a guest columnist.