

The Jesus delusion and idolatry

Sermon preached by the Rev. Mark Francisco Bozzuti-Jones, at the eleven o'clock service, January 21, 2007, the Third Sunday after the Epiphany. Based on Corinthians 12:12–31a and Luke 4:14–21.

A parishioner gave me Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* for Christmas. Written on the accompanying card was something like this: "Dear Mark, it is a little odd to be giving a priest a book by a professed atheist. But, you were a Jesuit, I am sure you can handle it, you are pretty smart and you might find something in it to preach about."

I don't know about the other things this kind woman wrote, but when I saw the title I knew, as Deacon J.D. Clarke loves to say, "It could preach." *The God Delusion*, a book that questions, criticizes and rejects belief in God is a book that every serious believer needs to read. Dawkins holds the view that belief in God is delusional, dangerous, and downright idiotic. If you knew, he writes, that you did not have to believe in God or come to church, you wouldn't. And, says he: "When one person suffers from a delusion it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion." God, Jesus and religions have always had their critics.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was accused of being delusional and outright mad. In the sentences that follow the gospel we hear today are references to the people declaring that Jesus is mad—they then drive him out of town and try to throw him off a cliff. In John chapter 6, Jesus was once again accused of being delusional, and many of his followers left him. Immediately, he turned to his disciples and asked them: "Will you also go?" Will you also go?

Dawkins' book and the events in our lives, our churches, the nation and the world do leave us to question why we believe in a God of life, justice and peace. If we are honest, there are moments when it does not seem to make sense to believe in God.

Gilbert O'Sullivan's lyrics come to mind: "Talk about God and His mercy/ Or if He really does exist/ Why did He desert me in my hour of need/ I truly am indeed Alone again, naturally/ It seems to me that

there are more hearts broken in the world that can't be mended/ Left unattended/ What do we do? What do we do?"

So are we delusional? I hope so. Is your belief in God and love delusional? I hope so too. If I may quote another song, "Everybody plays the fool, sometime/ There's no exception to the rule."

Maybe this is the reason Paul kept talking to the believers in Corinth, insisting that they love one another, insisting that they work together, insisting that they see themselves as gifted by God, united together. It doesn't get any more delusional than this: to hope against all hope. This is what the God Delusion is all about. To believe, against evidence to the contrary, that human beings can choose to love and to protect each other—and to resist evil.

Paul celebrates the madness that comes from believing in God, and Paul, who was imperfect on many levels, delusional in some areas and a prisoner of his time, did get some things right: ". . . But God has so arranged the body . . . that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Now you are the body of Christ and individually, members of it. This delusion is one that I hope will afflict all of us. To suffer with the lonely, the poor, the homeless and those for whom life is difficult.

Wars, divisions, family problems, natural disasters, revenge, financial challenges, death, disappointments in life and mental and physical illness—all these things make it difficult to believe in a loving God. It is, indeed, hard to hold to a belief in a greater good, a greater way and belief in a benevolent God.

Remember Shakespeare's King Lear—a king gone mad because of the abuse of power and love? We see Lear's descent into madness when he tries to divide his kingdom based upon which of his daughters can

best talk about her love for him, as if the sole proof of love is words. This play, more than any other, shows the complexity of love, honesty, friendship, sanity and delusion. King Lear dies broken hearted, yet without delusions. The reader or audience has learned the lesson: We can choose to do evil and wrong in the name of love and in the face of suffering, but it is also possible to live dignified, loving and honest lives in the face of deception, pain, hate, loss and delusion. It is why Jesus tells us that in the midst of all the pain and suffering, God's good news is being accomplished.

You don't have to believe. You don't have to come to church. You don't have to have faith. Mary Oliver, the poet, put it this way in her poem, *Wild Geese*: "You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees." If it is a delusion to choose to love, to pray, to work for a better world and to make sacrifices for others—I pray that God will make us all mad.

There is nothing you have to do, and you do not have to believe.

And yet we do believe, we do come to church, we do celebrate our Episcopal identity, we do pray and celebrate events and beliefs that defy science and baffle reason. And some are foolish enough to become new members of St. Bart's today. Maybe, just maybe, we cling to God because we know that we could be worse. Maybe, just maybe, we cling to God because, though at times it does not make any sense, we know that it has the potential to shape our lives. We know that the Christian life when lived well does make a tremendous difference in the world.

I do believe that there is a lot of delusion in religion, but the role of the mature believer is to embrace the loving and life-giving aspects of religion.

I do not believe that faith or religion is intrinsically a bad thing. But of this I am convinced: the question today is not one about atheism, not a question about belief, and not a question about religion, but a question of idolatry.

We put false gods before the living God. Our concepts of God are downright delusional—laughable, ridiculous and in many cases, dangerous. It is our idolatry that is delusional. People killing themselves and others in the name of God are deluded; people who do not care about the earth, do not care about the poor, people who do not live lives directed towards the good, the true and the beautiful are

deluded. Those who worship and trust themselves, money and success are deluded.

The dilemma facing every human being—atheists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, everybody who believes in a Higher Power—is: how do we worship the right God and support the right causes?

A wise religion teacher was told by her class that they did not believe in God. Her response was, "Which God don't you believe in?" The same question can be asked of those who claim to believe: which God do you believe in?

What are we worshipping? Only you can answer that question.

Lear and Dawkins are right to reject the war, the bigotry, the racism, the revenge, the stupidity, the hypocrisy and the sin done in the name of God or love. We are all guilty and forever will be. But the true worship of God demands that we admit that we are quite frequently wrong about God. True worship demands that we admit that what is not love, what is not forgiveness, what is not service, what is not patience and compassion is not God. What are we worshipping? Wonder what our lives would look like if we devoted time to answering this question. To worship our money, ourselves, our power and independence is idolatry. It is the sin and the practice of idolatry that brings shame to humanity, brings scandal to religion and spirituality and brings disgrace to what we define and worship as God.

It is idolatry that leads to delusion about God. All of us are in need of reexamining how we define God—the concept of God that we cling to and define as God—that is what may lead to idolatry.

How can we trust that our faith is not idolatry? How can we know that our God is not a delusion, a utopia or an exercise in futility? On so many levels we may never know, we can't know, because we walk by faith and not by sight. But if we stay close to the God we discover and see in Jesus, if we bring good news to the poor, if we proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed, this is reality at its greatest and best. When we accept that we who believe in God are often poor spiritually, financially and psychologically, when we accept that we are often blind and trapped, then we can begin to live into the reality of God's favor.

Understand this: Only believers can prove or disprove the need for God. Only you can show that love and the service to others has merit. Only we can

show that God is loving, forgiving and great. Let us walk in love, and those who walk in love and attempt to live in love cannot live in delusion.

Dawkins closes the introduction to his book with these words: "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down." I am happy to say that I still believe in God. Dear friends, If your faith in God works, by the time

you open it and by the time you live your life you will be worshipers of the One True God and true followers of Jesus Christ by the time you put it down. So open your book, open up your faith, open up your heart and live the love that you experience in Jesus. The Jesus of love, compassion and forgiveness is no delusion. *Amen.*

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