

January 1, 1967
Micah 6:1-8 (R.S.V.)
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A RELIGION THAT MAKES SENSE

One of the greatest of American philosophers was William James, who taught at Harvard and died in 1910. His outstanding literary achievement was probably his book, Varieties of Religious Experience, which is still a classical piece and assigned reading in many college courses dealing with the philosophy of religion.

In another eminent essay on the subject of pragmatism, which is the philosophical concept that the value of a belief is dependent on its practical consequences, William James commenced by quoting G. K. Chesterton, the English essayist and critic. This is the quotation. It is worth remembering.

"There are some people--and I am one of them-- who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy, it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy. We think the question is not whether one's theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run anything else affects them."

Now it is fruitless and inane to insist that every man ought to have a philosophy of life, or, if you wish, a religious philosophy. Every man does have a philosophy of life. If we have not carefully and laboriously developed our own philosophy, then we have carelessly and unwisely adopted the philosophy of the majority of those with whom we have daily contact.

To have a philosophy merely means to have some sense, some idea, however vague, of what life is all about. One can have an atheistic philosophy, or a religious philosophy. Each can be strong or weak. (Here I must pause to share with you the definition of an atheist which I shared with the retired men at their last meeting: An atheist is a man who goes to a Notre Dame-Southern Methodist football game and doesn't care who wins!)

If you have a religious philosophy, it can vary anywhere from the extreme fundamentalism of some of the more evangelistic sects, to the ultra-sophisticated liberalism of some Unitarians. But a philosophy of some kind we all must and do have. As William James put it, a philosophy "is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."

II

As Mr. Asher was reading the scripture lesson at one of last week's Christmas services, a certain familiar passage fell on my ears with a new meaning. The wise men, you will recall, stopped to see King Herod to find out where Christ had been born. He consulted his sages and was informed that the place was the city of David, namely, Bethlehem. Herod instructed the Magi to let him know when they had found Jesus so that he could come and worship him also. But the Biblical record points to Herod's ulterior purpose in these words:

"Herod sought the child to kill him."

What occurred to me as that passage was being read last week was that there are always those few persons (whom we might call iconoclasts were their motives more worthy than they usually are) who seek to kill or destroy that which is good, true and beautiful. They are intent on proving that life has no meaning and wish to eliminate all that might lend it meaning. Many contemporary artists,, musicians, authors, playwrights and rabble rousers are of this stripe.

Now many people shun philosophy because it is in their opinion "not practical". In their words, "philosophy bakes no bread." But I would like to suggest that philosophy is often of far greater importance and of more significant relevance to our daily life than is science.

For example, what practical difference does it make to you and to me in our everyday existence whether the sun revolves around the earth or the earth around the sun? For thousands of years men did not know the fascinating facts of this astronomical phenomenon and were probably no worse off for their ignorance. But if a religious philosophy can show us how bravely to bear pain and anguish, loneliness and despair, is not that piece of knowledge of inestimable value and of great practical worth?

It must always be remembered that science and philosophy, science and religion, are always engaged in different tasks. It is the task of science to tell us that things are what they are; it is the task of philosophy and religion to tell us what things are better than other things.

There are those sophisticated liberals who would have us believe that skepticism is always the best choice in the area of religion and philosophy; don't believe anything until it can be proven with a slide rule or a test tube. These are men of fear; they are afraid of being wrong. As for me, I would rather be duped by hope than to be duped by fear. If I am going to go down to the pit in ignorance, I would rather do so with faith and hope than in fear, trembling and doubt.

William James put it a bit differently:

"One who would shut himself off in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance."

In other words, if your faith is in error you have nothing to lose. If your doubt and skepticism is in error you have everything to lose.

This attitude that we should believe nothing in the area of religion and morality until it can be absolutely verified is an attitude which rests on a method which science itself condemns as being unscientific. This is not to say that in religion and morality we ought to be gullible. It merely suggests that in this area, as in every other discipline, we must often believe and act on the basis of partial knowledge, for as in every discipline, we only "see through a glass darkly."

III

I am, of course, preaching this sermon primarily with college students in mind. When I wrote the sermon I was not certain, of course, that any students would be here on New Year's Day, prone as they are to nocturnal celebrations. I practiced, however, what I preach. I prepared the sermon in faith and hope, not in doubt, skepticism and despair.

One thing college ought to teach us is to ask questions. Of even greater importance, however, is to know how to ask the right questions. As even sermons need a bit of comedy relief, let me share a story dealing with this matter of asking the right questions.

A man walked into a tavern one night with what he claimed was a talking dog. He made a bargain with the bartender for a free drink if he could make the dog talk. He put this question to the dog: "What do we call the ceiling up there?" The dog answered, "Roof". The bartender wouldn't agree that the dog had talked. The man put his second question, "How does sandpaper feel?" The dog replied, "Rough". Again the bartender refused to deliver the drink. The man asked his third and final question. "Who was the world's greatest baseball player?" and the dog came back with, "Ruth". The bartender threw the man and his dog out the door. As they picked themselves up, the dog turned to the master and asked, "Should I have said, DiMaggio?"

One of the questions we ought to ask about religion is this: Does it make sense? But we usually ask the question in too broad and general a way. The question is not whether it makes sense to everyone, but does it make sense to the person who holds it? This is the all important thing. Your religion must make sense to you, mine must make sense to me. Yours might not make sense to me and mine may not make sense to you, but religion must always make sense to the person who clings to it, otherwise we are no better off--nay, we are worse off--than the savage examining the entrails of a sheep in order to divine the future. The savage has a religion which may be pretty much based on superstition and magic, but it does make some kind of peculiar sense to him. If our religious faith does not make sense to us, then we are either hypocrites in holding to it, or foolish to put our faith in it.

No one, of course, can ever accept honestly, and sincerely, and effectively an imposed religion. An imposed religious faith is as contradictory as is a compelled morality. Neither has any real force and vitality. Freedom of religion is absolutely essential for a valid and meaningful religious philosophy. Indeed we can go further and insist that without freedom in religion, there can ultimately be no freedom of any kind; civil, social or political.

IV

I would conclude, therefore, that any religion that makes sense must contain at least three elements. First, it must be one which is freely chosen. Parents ought not force their religious faith upon their children. Likewise, college professors ought not force their atheistic or agnostic philosophies upon their students. In the end, no philosophy or religion will have meaning and significance for the person who has accepted it under whatever subtle compulsion.

Secondly, any religion that makes sense must be one which has been based on the examination of all available evidence. Any person who rejects religion because he has known one or two hypocrites who profess to be religious, is confessing to his own lack of good judgment. If you are going to look at the hypocrites, you must also look at the saints. The saints far outweigh the hypocrites--in quality if not in quantity. This is precisely what faith is, an examination of all the evidence, and then a choice of the most reasonable hypothesis.

Finally, religion must be based on our personal experience as well as on the experience of the whole human race. Has it done anything for others; is it capable of doing anything for us? Does it seem to make life better, richer and fuller, or do you think human life would be just as well off if men believed it had no meaning, no significance, no purpose, and was indeed, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?"

Let me close as I began, with another quotation from William James. This time from an essay entitled The Will To Believe:

"In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark. . . . If we should decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that too is a choice: But whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that anyone can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? Be strong and of good courage. Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . if death ends all, we cannot meet that death better."