

When my daughter was in high school she had a delightful friend whom I will call Jane. Jane was sixteen at the time. She was a wonderfully bright and intelligent young woman who was fun to engage in conversation. In one of our conversations she took a risk and declared to me that she didn't believe in God. Jane lived in a family where her father's engineering talents had created success and prosperity. Jane, herself, was a 'natural' at math and found science extremely exciting. Equally, she had been raised in a home where regular attendance at Roman Catholic Mass was encouraged and where her mother's commitment to the ways of faith was evident. In the midst of these conflicting influences, and in the height of adolescent self-definition, Jane declared that she didn't believe in God. I pondered her declaration and then responded: "You know Jane, I don't believe in the God that you don't believe in either."

Despite being a pastor and, perhaps because of it, I appreciated Jane's dilemma. In a culture that has accepted the scientific method as the litmus test for anything real, it is increasingly difficult to believe in a supernatural being who directs human life. To Jane's bright and inquisitive mind the concept of a God who functions like a puppeteer or a benevolent monarch made no sense. My own faith commitments have always been tempered by the Roman Centurions statement to Jesus, "I believe, help me

with my unbelief”.

A defining moment came to me a few years before my conversation with Jane. It was the year of the first mass shooting in a U.S. high school in Columbine, Colorado. At that time mass shootings were still an affront to the senses and one of my parishioners posed a challenging question to me. At the time, this parishioner’s aging mother was languishing in a nursing home waiting to die but unable to take her last breath. Filled with anguish over her mother’s condition and shocked by the Columbine massacre she asked, “Why does God allow 13 young people to be murdered while my mother is waiting to die?” I respected the frankness of her question. As I pondered her question I concluded that the God I knew could neither hurry her mother’s death, nor prevent the atrocity of Columbine. Only a deity who had the power to control life could do that and I was forced to conclude that the God I knew did not have that kind of power. Borrowing wisdom from a theologian named Carter-Heyward, I concluded that God was more likely a verb, than a noun; an experience than an entity; readily found in the outpourings of grief and compassion rather than as the architect of tragic events. That recognition culminated a long journey away from knowing God as the Father Almighty, the King of Kings, All-Powerful Ruler and Judge. In that moment I began a journey,

which I am still on, to understand 'God' as a kind of 'code language' for absolute love, justice, peace, compassion, and courage. When those things are fully present, God is present. When those things are intimated, God is near. When those things are absent, we long for God.

As a verb, God does not have the kind of power we have traditionally attributed to God. Only a 'noun' can 'decree,' a verb must act. A verb by its very nature requires relationship, requires both the one who acts with love, justice, peace, and compassion and the one who receives those actions. Some may ask, "What use is a God who has no power; who does not control the world?" Let me be clear that God-the-verb is not without power. Do not tell the South African who has reclaimed her country that there is no power in acts of justice! Do not tell the colonial government of India, who crumpled because of Ghandi's refusal to eat, that there is no power in acts of peace! Do not tell the survivors who witnessed a man drown in the Potomac River after five times passing the safety harness to someone else, that there is no power in acts of compassion! This God, this acting, relationally incarnate God is not powerless – in fact this is the very power that can save the world obsessed as it is with the power of status, wealth, tribalism and patriarchy. It was this spiritual awakening that allowed me to say to Jane, "I don't believe in the God that you don't believe

in either.”

In the years between those events and now I have come to cherish the piece of scripture we read this morning: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God ... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

Ironically this passage describes God as both noun, “God is love” and as a verb “if we love one another, God lives in us.” A few decades ago John Lennon offered a version of this message. Most of you in this room will recall the words:

Love, love love. All you need is love,
... love is all you need
There's nothing you can do that can't be done
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung
No one you can save that can't be saved
It's easy – all you need is love.

Brian Epstein, who managed the Beatles at the time Lennon wrote this song, explained that Lennon wanted to give the world a clear message - not easily misinterpreted - that love is everything. Lennon's lyrics were deemed the most political song of 1967 and earned him the posthumous title of a “humanitarian hero”.

Like Jesus, Lennon, used the word Love because he thought it had the potential to change the world. Jesus revealed God's love to us

through his own life of justice, peace, compassion and courage and then gave us, his followers, this great commandment: “Love God – that is to say love loving with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, then love your neighbour and love yourself.”

In his recent book, *The Face of God*, Roger Scruton warns that our culture’s obsession with atheism or with turning away from religion isn’t simply about rejecting theism – or the “in-charge God.” He suggests that atheism risks rejecting love as the essence and work of our lives. The world, our world is desperately in need of love to counteract so many messages that de-humanize us. The messages of personal failure that so many of us have lived with spawned by a culture that idolizes athletes, models and business magnates who, in light of recent suicides suggest that these attributes alone don’t make life meaningful.

The world, our world is desperately in need of love to counteract the growing isolation reflected in electronic rather than real relationships where the risk of love, justice-making, and sharing compassion empower the courage to face the challenges of our lives.

The world, our world is desperately in need of love to counteract the messages of scarcity, tribalism, and racial superiority that are giving rise to the neo-dictatorships of Trump, Ford and pro-Brexit supporters. This God-

power comprised of love is not the stuff of romance novels. Rather it is the gritty kind of love that might take us to the cross but ultimately leads to a resurrection of life and hope.

If I were to have that conversation with Jane today I would implore to avoid an easy atheism. I would applaud her questions but encourage her to consider that the scientific method is not the only one lens by which to live her life. I would encourage her to pay attention to the indescribable movement in her soul when the vast sky turns pink and purple at sunset. God is that moment of awe. I would remind her of the indignation she felt when she learned that someone threw a brick in the window of a sixty-six year old man because of the clothes he wore and the way he prayed. God is that indignation and the community of solidarity that came to stand at his side. I would ask if a friend or lover ever held her when she was frightened or sad. Those arms of love and comfort are the arms of God.

Don't opt for an easy atheism believing that engineering and computing, physics and mathematics are 'pure' pursuits. Ask Albert Einstein how pure his pursuit of the atom was when it exploded over Nagasaki. Ask chemists about the purity of their work when we read of an unsuspecting Brit succumbing to nerve gas. God's love is gritty because it calls us to account for our lives and our actions. Listen Jane, please

listen. You can let go of the claim that ancient myths must be accepted as fact but do not abandon the wisdom that calls you to love yourself and your neighbour. You can relinquish the creeds and the rituals but do not abandon the example of Jesus, and other prophets, who call you to value life over wealth.

I was not wise enough to say any of this to Jane so many years ago but I've come to believe that the Christian community must be increasingly bold with its message of love. In the months I have with you this fall I hope to learn from and with you what it means to invite people into a life of God-inspired love. As John Lennon wrote, "There's nothing we can do that can't be done – all we need is love." Amen.