

ATHEISM—A SPIRITUAL VACUUM

(07/09/17)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 14
1 Corinthians 6:19-20
Mark 4:1-9

“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” (Psalm 14:1)

Several months ago a reporter from a Worcester newspaper called to ask my opinion of what she called “smut radio.” Smut radio, for those of you who may not have had the pleasure, is sexually explicit talk by the disc jockey or sexually explicit banter between the disc jockey and people who call in to the station.

The reporter informed me that this sexually explicit banter is most blatant from 4-8 p.m. It doesn't take a rocket surgeon to figure out that this is when young people are home from school. When I sampled the format of the specific station she mentioned, it did seem that most of the callers were high school kids. I concurred with her description of this type of programming: the banter was explicit, graphic, provocative, and, in my opinion, without any redeeming features--a virtual pornography of the air.

The reporter asked me as a minister, psychologist, and the teacher of a course on Psychology of Adolescence and a course on Identity and Human Sexuality at Assumption College what I thought the long range effects would be on young people who are either listeners or callers, those who are encouraged to expose their innermost sexual secrets or acts on the air and/or expose certain parts of their bodies to passing motorists.

I told her I believe this has long-range deleterious effects upon a young person's values. Because I am a strong supporter of First Amendment rights, I don't believe this sort of program should be banned. I believe people have a right to talk about their sex life and about their bodies this way if they want, and I should not force my values on them. However, I wish this sort of programming were so unpopular the station would go out of business. A pornography store will not stay in business if no one buys its stuff.

A few weeks ago, the members of the Diaconate, the chair of Stewardship & Growth and I met with the executive director of Route One Ministries. This ministry reaches out to girls and women who have been caught up in the sex trade, specifically girls and women who are employed (“employed” is not the correct term here) in strip

clubs. They pray for these women, enter the clubs to give them little gift packets, and just let them know that someone is praying for them, that someone cares.

The response to their outreach has been overwhelming. These girls and women, who are really used and abused, are often moved to tears that someone cares enough to reach out. On occasion, the team of women that go into the strip club are able to guide the girls/women to Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, a safe shelter for them and their children, or help them go back to school for their GED or courses in the English language. The ministry is presently active in Boston and Springfield; our church is exploring ways that we could help them expand into the strip clubs in Worcester.

As you know, we also support the American Himalayan Foundation program to stop girl trafficking. In Nepal teams go out into the villages to persuade families to keep their girls in school and not fall prey to the lies of recruiters about how their daughter can have a better life in a foreign country. By the way, at least twenty-one million adults and two million children are bought and sold worldwide into commercial sexual servitude, into forced or bonded labor every year. As my father used to say, “That’s enough to gag a maggot.” And yes, it happens in our country, our state, and perhaps even in our town.

I would like to live in a society, in a world where women and children are not sexually exploited or sold into indentured servitude. I also believe that this terrible evil can begin with something as simple as smut radio; it plants the seed for the objectivizing of women in young people’s minds. We need to remember, however, that if there were no demand, there would be no market for the sex trade. The problem lies in the demand.

I believe there is a moral and spiritual vacuum in our society. Too many people have no sense of what the apostle Paul meant when he said that our body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit within us, which we have from God,” and that we should think about what we bring into that temple. Listening to or viewing pornography is putting garbage into the temple of the Holy Spirit. Does this sort of input have an effect on our young people, on how they think about love and sex, about how they view women? Of course! As our computer programmers say: garbage in--garbage out.

Science tells us that nature abhors a vacuum. When we have a vacuum in the center of our life, the part that should be filled with God, with spirituality, with healthy values of love and respect, that vacuum tends to be filled with garbage. I don’t think

parents can protect their children from exposure to this kind of material; it is ubiquitous. I hope that the views the parents transmit concerning women, people of different races, or people of a different sexual orientation are so healthy that the child would not be the least bit interested in listening to banter about rape, gay bashing, or “offing” immigrants.

I do not mean to imply that the parents of children who listen to smut radio have not done their job as parents. There are many other factors, e.g., the peer group, that influence a young person’s choices. But after all is said and done, there has to be a vacuum of some kind in the child’s life or this sort of junk would never take root.

Jesus tells us that weeds will choke out even good seed that falls on shallow ground. Without some kind of religious or spiritual upbringing, I fear that many of our young people’s minds could be considered shallow ground.

God is the ground of our being, our spiritual center, the source of our values and our meaning in life. Our religious traditions provide resources to help us deepen our relationship with God. There are different paths up the same mountain. However, all paths do not lead up the mountain. Some paths lead into the gutter. Even organized religion has not always respected women and fought for their rights; in fact, they have often been a major part of the problem.

When we do not open ourselves to God’s presence and guidance, when we push God out to the periphery, God’s power to guide the unfolding of our life begins to wane. Then the center, which has become empty, begins to be filled with garbage.

The person who does not believe in God creates a vacuum in his/her life. This vacuum may be filled with drugs, pleasure, or material possessions. Despite what some of the existentialist philosophers tell us, atheism is not a virtue. The person who denies the reality of God because of an outmoded concept of the Deity, the person who does not allow this central relationship to grow and deepen, is making a mistake. The psalmist would describe that person as a fool.

A German pastor entered a Rathskeller where a man, seeking to embarrass him, rose to his feet and suddenly called out quite loudly, “Es gibt keinen Gott” (“There is no God”). The pastor went to him, calmly laid his hand on his shoulder, and said, “Friend, what you have said is not new. The Bible said that more than 2,000 years ago.”

The man replied, “I never knew that the Bible made such a statement.”

“Oh yes,” the pastor informed him. “Psalm 14 verse 1 tells us, ‘The fool says in his heart there is no God.’ But there is a great difference between that fool described in the psalm and you. That fool was quite modest and said it only in his heart; he didn’t go about yelling it out in taverns.”

The man was so ashamed and moved, he showed up at the pastor’s church the following Sunday.

Dwight D. Eisenhower once said: “It takes no brains to be an atheist. Any stupid person can deny the existence of a supernatural power because our human physical senses cannot detect it. But thinking people cannot ignore the mystery of life: the marvelous order of the universe that moves about us. The universe around us gives evidence of the handiwork of a beneficent Deity. For my part, that Deity is the God of the Bible and of Jesus Christ, His Son.”

How can we look at this universe, the beauty of nature, the mysterious order of our own bodies and minds, the phenomenon of love, and not sense the God who is behind it all? Thomas Edison said: “No one can study chemistry and see the wonderful way in which certain elements combine with the nicety of the most delicate machine ever invented, and not come to the inevitable conclusion that there is a Big Engineer who is running this universe.” I’m not sure I see God as a “Big Engineer,” but I know what Edison meant and I agree with his sentiment.

If we want evidence to counter the secular tendency to atheism, look at those people who kept God in the center of their life and see what sort of life they led. Look at Jesus and Buddha. Look at Francis of Assisi. Look at Albert Schweitzer and Pope Francis. Look at Billy Graham and Martin Luther King, Jr. Look at Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa. If there were no God, from whence would these people have drawn their inspiration and power, their quest for truth and justice? Only a fool would make a virtue of denying the spiritual center of the universe, of all life, and of our individual life.

When we find the God who was revealed to us in Jesus, we will find that God everywhere. The Buddha, in his first sermon, simply held up a flower. It’s all there, all the secrets of the universe in a single flower. Galileo, when questioned by the Inquisition as to his belief in the existence of God, replied by pointing to a straw on the floor of his dungeon. Galileo told his inquisitors that from the structure of that object alone he knew

with certainty the existence of an intelligent creator. Of course, if the Inquisition would care to look through his telescope to see how Jupiter's moons revolve around it, they would be even more impressed. I suspect they declined.

Kepler, the astronomer, had a friend who denied the existence of God. The friend took the view, which prevails in some circles even today, that the universe came into being on its own, purely by chance. In order to convince his friend, Kepler constructed an intricate model of the solar system, our sun with the planets circling round it.

When Kepler's friend came into the observatory and saw the beautiful model, he exclaimed with delight, "How beautiful it is! Who made it?" Kepler replied, "No one made it. It made itself." "Nonsense," replied the friend, "things don't make themselves. Someone had to have made it."

Kepler then replied, "Friend, you say that this little toy model could not make itself. This model is but a very insignificant imitation of our great universe. How, then, can you maintain that this great universe made itself?"

During this beautiful summer season, let us open our mind and our heart to God. Let us develop the spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship that help us discover this God everywhere, even in the valleys of deep darkness. Then let us pray for and find ways to reach out to those who are suffering from a spiritual vacuum, those who are in desperate need of just what we have and what we have to offer as a Christian church.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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