

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

To Whom Else Can We Go?

David O'Hara

7 Oct 2009

Reading: Jn 6.67-69

A number of recent books allege that religion, and specifically Christianity, can be easily explained and summarily dismissed as irrelevant and dangerous.

This assertion by the so-called New Atheists has gained a lot of publicity and seems to have won fairly broad acclaim.

I find, however, speaking for myself, at least, that the assertion misses the mark pretty widely.

Perhaps what strikes me as most odd about it is the way in which it is assumed that we have explained religion and so we can easily dismiss it.

Related to this is the contention that God is easy to grasp. Recently, when I told someone I am a philosopher of religion, he asked, "Don't you think that if there were a God, we'd have discovered it already?"

This makes God sound like the simplest thing to understand. But why should we think that? Is God the low-hanging fruit of the cosmos? Is God not at all mysterious, not at all hard to grasp?

Indeed, Augustine opens his *Confessions* with a litany of paradoxes about God. How can God come into me if God is greater than me? How can a finite mind understand an infinite God? And so on.

But that is a topic for another sermon, perhaps.

Leaving aside for a moment the claim that religion is dangerous, let me offer a brief defense of religion's relevance.

That would be a strange project if I were intending to defend all religion equally. I would be acting as arrogantly as the New Atheists if I claimed to be able to paint all religions

with the same brush. So let me speak of my own religion, Christianity; and let me speak of my own experience with it.

(I hope to point to some of its positive features without criticizing and other religions while doing so.)

Simon Peter's words in today's reading from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel come during a dramatic time in Jesus' ministry. The disciples have seen him turn a few loaves and fishes into food for five thousand in a way that swells their ranks and makes local heroes of all of them; they have sailed through a storm and worked hard at the oars; they have seen a ghost walking on the waves only to find, shockingly, that it is Jesus himself; and then Jesus has said some remarkably offensive things to hear about religion, his body, and his blood that are—if you will permit me to say so—very hard to swallow. When they hear these words, many of their followers decide to be followers no longer.

And who could blame them? Yet Jesus dismissively says some of the people who were following were only interested in filing their bellies. He seems content to let them wander away.

The things Jesus says are offensive and strange, but I cannot see how I can do without them. As Simon Peter says to him, "you have the words of eternal life." I don't think this is just a way of saying "I want to go to heaven." I think it means – or at least I hear it as meaning – you have words that are about the fullness of life now, life that stretches from here into eternity.

I do not know of another account of life that I find as satisfying as the one that Jesus speaks about, in which he tells me that I have missed the mark but there is still hope; in which he tells me that even bread and fish and wine can be charged with God's grandeur; in which he tells me that there are real things worth striving for, beyond my reach but not beyond the reach of God who is in the act of making me like himself.

At the same time, these words of Jesus are hard to hear. They tell me I cannot be whole unless another is broken; they seem to preach a strange cannibalism while claiming to be the holiest of medicine; they demand a long obedience and remind me that I am inadequate to that task; they deflate my ambitions and my sense of my own importance, while at the same time telling me that I am esteemed by God; they tell me that God is easy to please but hard to satisfy, as Chesterton put it.

You might ask, would it not be both easier and better to live without these paradoxes and mysteries? Jesus, seeing me tempted to go that way, asks, "do you also wish to leave me?"

Honestly, yes, at least sometimes. In this life I have been hurt in ways I do not wish to remember, and I have hurt others in ways I do not wish to admit. Staying with you, Jesus, means having to remember and admit those things. Staying with you, Jesus, means having to grapple with your hard and offensive and uncomfortable words. It means letting you be the physician of my soul. And I admit that very often I do not want that because I do not want the sore areas touched by anyone.

Is Simon Peter saying the same thing? When I hear him answer you, I hear several things at once. He answers you with a question: “To whom else can we go?”

Maybe that is pious affirmation: “There is no one else we’d rather follow!”

But maybe it is just the question it sounds like: is there anyone else to whom we can go? Following you is not easy. I agree with Simon Peter: “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to know and believe that you are the holy one of God.” It’s not easy, but I can’t imagine life without trying.

These are the things that the critics of religion miss, as far as I am concerned. We know religion is dangerous – it is dangerous to our selfish commitments, our easy avoidance of justice, our complacency, our satisfaction with our own iniquity.

We know also that it is hardly irrelevant for just that reason.

And without it my world would make less sense.

What I need is not an excuse for calling religion outmoded but the words of eternal life, the words that shake me to my bones and remind me to live with purpose; the words that call me out and look me in the eye and ask me: “do you want to leave, too?”

It is a strange, an uncanny, and a lifegiving comfort to follow Christ. To whom else can I go?

HOLY COMMUNION

Wednesday, October 7, 2009

Prelude “*My Life Flows on in Endless Song*” by Young/Carter

Welcome/announcements

Invocation

Litany

L: God be with me in this Your day, every day and every way, with me
and for me in this Your day; and the love and affection of heaven be
toward me.

L: All we are Lord,

C: We place into Your hands.

L: All that we do, Lord,

C: We place into Your hands.

L: Everything we ask for

C: We place into Your hands.

L: Everything we hope for

C: We place into Your hands.

L: The troubles that weary us

C: We place into Your hands.

L: The thoughts that disturb us

C: We place into Your hands.

L: Each that we pray for

C: We place into Your hands:

L: Each that we care for

C: We place into Your hands.

L: Hands, Lord, Your gift to us, we stretch them up to You. Always
You hold them.

All: God’s work, Our Hands. Amen.

Scripture

John 6:68-69

Sermon “*To Whom Else Can We Go?*” David O’Hara, Philosophy

Hymn “*My Life Flows on in Endless Song*” ELW #763, vv. 1 & 4

Holy Communion

ASA Inauguration

Benediction, Dismissal

L: May you see the face of Christ in everyone you meet. May everyone you meet see the face of Christ in you.
Go in love and work with the Lord.

C: **Thanks be to God.**

Postlude

“This is the Feast”

by Tom Keesecker

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

CLEAN WATER PROJECT - *For All Who Are Thirsty:* Let's work together to eliminate dirty water! USF, Sioux Falls Seminary, and Augustana are partnering to bring clean water to people who need it - here and abroad. If you're interested in helping, **sign up in the narthex or email** Hannah Miller at hmmiller08@ole.augie.edu or Kayla Rockwell at kerockwell07@ole.augie.edu Project will culminate in a silent auction and concert on Monday, Nov. 23rd.

PET BLESSING on Native American Day - Mon., Oct. 12, 10 am - All furry, feathered and finned friends and their human escorts are welcome! No snakes please. Bring photos of pets not able to attend. Please leash or kennel all pets for the safety and comfort of all participants. Treats for pets and humans provided.

This week in chapel:

Wednesday (7th) Holy Communion, 10 am - Dave O'Hara, Reli.;
- ASA Inauguration

Friday (9th) Worship, 10 am - Rob Oliver, 40th yr . memorial for
1969 Debate Team who perished in a plane crash

Sunday (11th) Worship, 11 am - Meg Eide, '08

Monday (12th) Pet blessing, 10 am