

## “HOW DO WE KNOW THERE IS A GOD?” FOCUSING ON THE IDEAL

Our current sermon series is “Reaching for God: Different Ages, Different Calls.” The last several weeks we have looked at “service;” how reaching out to help others is both “God’s will being done on earth,” and a path that draws us closer to God.

We’ve considered that in reaching for God at different times in our lives, our calls may be different; sometimes, we may seek God with our intellect; or we may simply approach God with an open heart; or we may choose to honor God through our actions. Head, hands and heart, or some combination of these ways, inform our Path towards the Light throughout our lifetimes.

But sometimes there comes a time in a person’s life when a perplexing question presents itself: “How do we even know there is a God?” Perhaps the questioner is thinking Science and Religion are at odds with each other; Science hasn’t located God, so where’s the proof? Perhaps a fantastic Bible tale strains credulity—Jonah swallowed by a whale? You’re kidding, right?—and one is tempted to consider all of the Scriptures nothing more than Bronze-Age myth. Perhaps one is hurting from the loss of a loved one, or observing the suffering that exists in the world and wonders how a loving God could allow such things.

So in a way “How do we know there is a God?” is a very logical question, and it’s normal for this thought to come up.

A practical way to deal with this question is to use a method called “focusing on the ideal,” which I’ll explain in a minute. But first let me point out some hidden assumptions in the question “How do we know there is a God?”

The first assumption is that “God” can be properly defined. If you’re seeking the truth of God’s existence you must start with an acceptable definition of “God;” if you’re doubting God’s existence, you’re actually doubting whatever definition you’ve chosen. Remember, “Gee-Oh-Dee: God,” is just a word. If you grew up believing that God is an old man with long hair and a beard, who wears a long, white robe and reclines on a cloud-throne listening to angels playing harp music all day (occasionally tossing thunder bolts in our direction)—well, if that’s your definition, I can understand why you might have doubts. Should we try for a better definition of God? Humble creatures that we are, gazing into the spiritual realm, are we even capable of defining God?

Zen Buddhism uses “koans:” paradoxical anecdotes or riddles (like, “what is the sound of one hand clapping?”) that aim to provoke enlightenment while demonstrating the limits of logical reasoning. Here is a Zen expression that at first seems quite macabre: “If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him!” This is intended to teach a deeper meaning, that every time we “define the divine,” we limit it. Preconceptions must be “killed.” When we say, “that’s what it is!” about God, we stop looking, we stop seeing. The true nature of the Buddha, or of the Christ, or of God, cannot be put into human language. A hard definition puts Reality in a box for our convenience, and prevents our being continuously open to discovering the secrets of the Universe. The Transcendent, by its very nature, is ineffable: it

cannot be put into words. It may be hard for some of us to accept Mystery—we want all the answers right away—but it is better to keep our eyes wide open than to settle on easy answers. Here is how Pope Francis put it: "If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble."

It is paradoxical, but a type of agnosticism—not knowing all the answers—is a healthy and necessary part of the faith journey. So we shouldn't let the question, "How do I know there is a God?" fool us into thinking we can pin down the nature of the universe.

It's a fallacy to prematurely fix on a static definition of God, and we wonder if the intellect, the mind of man, is, in fact, the proper organ for comprehending the divine. Yes, we have said "the head" (along with "heart" and "hands") is one of the paths that lead to God, but remember in describing "The Yoga of the Mind," that the Hindus stress the intellect can point to God, but not take us all the way there. The purpose of using the intellect to seek God, is to move past the intellect. Asking the question, "How do I know there is a God?," and trying to answer it with the brain alone is a recipe for getting stuck in a thought-loop with no means of escape. We need to engage other parts of our being besides than just the brain.

Here is an example of what I mean: when you meet a new person, you are actually receiving a massive amount of data all at once, and not all of it is processed on the thought level. In forming a reaction to the new person, we certainly use sight, smell and hearing, but probably other subtler senses, too. We may have thoughts, but a lot

more is going on than we notice. We receive information and process it in many ways beyond thinking.

Don't get me wrong—the human brain is one of the most remarkable things in the universe. It distinguishes us from our fellow-creatures in the animal kingdom; it is a tool that has created civilization and put us on the moon; it seems to be limitless in its power. And yet, this power that we sometimes control, just as often seems to control us! From the moment we wake up, our thoughts drive our activities and all the thinking that takes place in each of us as individuals creates a separation between us and the rest of the world. Our thinking mind, the highway of our everyday consciousness, is an amazing tool, but it is only one tool in the toolbox.

Just like a screwdriver is not great for pounding in a nail, relying on everyday conscious thinking to apprehend the divine may be a stretch. You've heard the story of the drunk looking under the streetlamp for his lost key. A passerby sees him and, trying to help, asks, "where were you when you lost your key?" The drunk answers, "well, I wash down at the end of the block when I dropped it, but the light'sh better here!" The light of the intellect is bright, but can shine only so far.

Here is what the psychologist and philosopher William James had to say in his 1902 book, The Varieties of Religious Experience: "Our normal, waking consciousness is but one special type of consciousness whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the

requisite stimulus and at a touch they are there in all their completeness...no account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question, for they are discontinuous with ordinary consciousness...At any rate, they forbid our premature closing of accounts with reality.”

Think about the wonder of birds flying south. When it's too foggy for them to observe natural features, they scan the earth's magnetic field for guidance. Humans also have organs of perception that are under-utilized, and states of consciousness available to us beyond the everyday.

So this method that I'm introducing today, called “focusing on the ideal,” uses the intellect, in a disciplined, directed way, but not by itself; it brings in other qualities we possess: like the will, the heart, and intuition.

It's based on the notion that inside every human is something like a compass that points True North. It points to something we may call “The Ideal.”

The concept of the “ideal” seems very slippery, but that's what makes it amazing, because it works for everybody. Everybody has some general sense, “in their bones—” perhaps hazy, perhaps crystal clear—of something to follow, something beckoning them, an archetype of perfection they know exists somewhere, somehow. To

me, it is Spirit calling us home, but this ideal will present itself a little differently to everybody. A scientist may be seeking Truth with a capital T. The artist responds to Beauty. Some are called by Love. By Goodness. Purity. Wisdom. Awareness. Energy. We follow these qualities and in the end we find they are the same. Many in this room see Christ as a pattern to follow: that is a wonderful ideal. Someone's ideal may not be in religious terms at all, but focusing on the ideal always works; that's because there is a different path for each of us; the ideal presents itself in a way that speaks to each individual, and all paths lead to the same place.

Your ideal may start out very vague; is there a feeling you get when you're helping others? Or a feeling you get taking in a perfect sunset? Yes, there is a "rightness" to something outside of the mundane, and it calls us. When we focus on it, the ideal will become clearer. Maybe your ideal is just a vague sense of following a glimmering light? The light will grow brighter. When we practice focusing on the ideal, it's like GPS, we are given step-by-step directions toward our target. We feel it getting closer, gaining clarity.

There are many ways to work with your ideal. Some folks make lists: they write down their ideal as envisioned today; they write down behaviors to help them meet the challenge; they reflect on their progress. Some folks use the ideal in their prayer time, to keep their spiritual goals in sight. Meditation, the practice that quiets our thinking, is the perfect opportunity for our deepest aspirations to come forward.

To sum up, "How do we know there is a God?" is a perfectly good question posed by the intellect, but the intellect does not provide all

the tools necessary to answer the question. The good news is we don't have to be stuck on mental puzzles, that everyone has the ability to move steadily toward a spiritual ideal which presents itself, in one guise or another, to each of us. Focusing on the ideal is an inward journey, a centering journey, using information about the universe that each of us already has as a starting point. Take the first step. Focus on your ideal and follow the path it reveals. As the Master has assured us, "Knock, and the door will be opened."

Amen