

Who's Your Friend? The Indifferent
Luke 16:19-31 and 1 Timothy 6:6-19

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Before we begin tonight's look at your friends, the indifferent, I want to share one more thing about your friend, the saint, that I discovered since last week. It seems that there is a new movement afoot to begin an organized atheist church. It's called the Sunday Assembly Everywhere (SAE) denomination, and contrary to what you might think, it is not simply an escape from all things church. In fact, it is so much like church it is quite surprising. The founders of this group promise, in their own words now, that the Assembly "will solace worries, provoke kindness, and inject a touch of transcendence into the everyday. Life can be tough," they note, "It is. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, we have moments of weakness or life just isn't fair. We want The Sunday Assembly to be a house of love and compassion, where, no matter what your situation, you are welcomed, accepted and loved." And the movement attracts people who feel like this: "I don't think religion should have a monopoly on community. I like the idea of a secular temple, where atheists can enjoy the benefits of an idealized, traditional church — a sense of community, a thought-provoking sermon, a scheduled period of respite, easy access to community service opportunities, group singing, an ethos of self-improvement, free food — without the stinging imposition of God Almighty."

“A community with the benefits of a traditional church, but without the stinging imposition of the God Almighty.” That’s a curious way to think about church. I’d like to think we are such a community, even though we believe in God.

There is some crossover between those I have described as “saints” and those I will describe tonight as “indifferent,” and you can see some of this crossover in the somewhat contradictory data of religious preference surveys. According to the October 2012 report of the Pew Research Center, “The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion, the so-called ‘nones,’ continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%). This large and growing group of Americans is less religious than the public at large on many conventional measures, including frequency of attendance at religious services and the degree of importance they attach to religion in their lives.” Of course, this data is describing only the United States, and, as it has also been well documented, the numbers in Europe are even more startling.

“However, a new survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion

& Public Life, conducted jointly with the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, finds that many of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious" (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor. With few exceptions, though, the unaffiliated say they are *not* looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics."

"Of course," says the Apostle Paul to young Timothy, "Of course there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." How is it that the religion of Jesus, who would no doubt agree with what Paul wrote, how is it that Christianity has become perceived

as being “too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics?” Well, probably because it is, and often has been, even as far back as Timothy’s time, and thus, the reason it was included in this letter.

On the surface, our passage from First Timothy is addressing the perils of wealth and a preoccupation with money. And while that is true, and worth talking about in its own right, I think that this issue of money is but one symptom among many of a greater malady, one you could call the disease of indifference. Whether it is money or power or politics, things we generally consider corruptible, or whether it is a concern for the environment, or for animal rights, or for art and beauty, or for family and friends, things we generally consider uplifting, there will always be something calling out to the human heart, beckoning it away from the Creator of all those good things, seeking to supplant “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” As the old saying goes, “Out of sight, out of mind,” and that seems to apply so easily to the God “whom no one has ever seen or can see!” If there is no plain evidence of God, and there is so much competition for our human affections, how can we expect people to be anything less than indifference toward God and toward church?

Whether we like it or not, much of the responsibility of the disease of indifference must fall on us, those who claim not to be indifferent. Theologians throughout the ages have tried to come up with reasons why some are attracted to

the faith and some are not, why some respond to the invitation and why some do not. A significant thrust of my own tradition, the Reformed tradition of John Calvin and John Knox and all their followers, suggests that God has somehow decided in advance who will be interested and who will be indifferent, a quite convenient solution that would seem to take us off the hook. And while that perspective might be designed to help us avoid a sense of guilt or anguish about those who don't choose for God – after all, it's between them and God – it isn't exactly great motivation for us to help people to see why choosing godliness with contentment is worth their while. Others have viewed the disease of indifference through the lens of free will, denying what the atheist church member described as “the stinging imposition of the God Almighty,” by saying that God presents us with the option of faith or faithlessness, godliness or godlessness, and human beings are free to choose without any decision preordained by God. That's fair enough. I'll buy the idea of a God who doesn't force faith on us. But where exactly will people learn of the options, if not through the church?

One blogger's take on the rise of the nones is this: “What if part of the reason the ‘Nones’ are so underwhelmed by organized religion isn't because they don't find *Jesus* interesting, but because it appears to them that *Christians* don't find him sufficiently interesting enough to take seriously?” and, as he describes in the blog, live out his teachings authentically. In other words, what if it is the church's indifference that gives rise to the public's indifference? What if it is the

competition you face, and I face, that turns us away from God and other people, and leaves them without one of the options? What if you and I have not embraced godliness with contentment, but rather the temptations of wealth? What if we have pinned our hopes on the uncertainty of riches rather than on “God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment?” Is there any hope for us? Is there any hope for your friend, the indifferent, the none?

Well, of course there is. There is always hope with God. The future is God’s horizon of hope. But we have to walk toward that horizon. It doesn’t come toward us. And so Paul tells Timothy, and tells us, in which direction is that horizon. “As for those who in the present age are rich,” and we can add to that, distracted by any of the symptoms of the disease of indifference, “command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches [or anything else], but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” You see, the good news for your friend, the indifferent, and for you, is that although all of us may be indifferent about God, God is not indifferent toward us. God’s horizon of hope is that “life that really is life,” the one which transforms the restlessness of indifference into that godliness with contentment.

And so you are wondering how you might invite your indifferent friend to church on October 6, the one who says, “So what?,” “Meh,” or “Yeah, whatever,” the one who may be an atheist or an agnostic, or maybe even believes in God, prays everyday, and thinks the church is a benefit to society. I think the best way, once again, as with the sinner and the saint, is with your honesty and humility, both owning your own indifference, and the pain or loss it has caused you, but also testifying to the difference God has made in your life, how with God’s help, you have taken hold of “the life that really is life.” If the surveys are true, more often than not, your invitation to come to church at a certain time and a certain place, will open up a conversation about things that really matter. And that’s because people want to believe in God, and they want to believe in hope, because as distracted and indifferent as they may be, they really do want godliness with contentment. And when they see your belief in the unseen God, when they see your journey toward that horizon of hope, when they see the richness of your life in your generosity and good works rather than in your bank account, they are seeing you make “the good confession,” as Paul calls it, the good confession that Christ made, the one that showed us that God is not indifferent toward us, but rather calls us to eternal life, the riches of grace, and love, and compassion we experience when we are no longer trapped in indifference, but indeed made different. May God give us courage to share the difference Christ has made in our lives, that all might “take hold of the life that really is life.” Amen.