

Bark if you Believe

Sermon by the Rev. Art Lester

There are all sorts of theology out there these days. You have a whole Chinese menu to choose from, with the same problems those huge menus cause: when there's too much choice, you simply lose your appetite. Go down the list with me: narrative theology, process theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, natural theology, systematic theology, historical theology, practical theology, Biblical theology... the head swims.

The other day I came upon one that I really like. It's called "redneck theology". Here's an outline:

God loves you, so He makes it likely that you'll burn in Hell.

Sex is dirty and vile, so save it for the one you really love.

Yippee! Give me that old time religion. We laugh now, but it was just such paradoxes that made me and my friends into junior atheists when we reached our teen years. It was bold, modern and a bit transgressive. We refused to say the Lord's Prayer in school assemblies. We would drive out to Moon Lake at night and drink cans of strong beer and talk about sex, art, sex, politics, sex and religion. And sex.

My mother didn't know it, but I had put away all that stuff and nonsense I got from Riverside Presbyterian Church about Jesus and Heaven and—above all—sin. The future stretched away as a seemingly infinite amount of time, and even once when a guy my age water skied into a dock and was killed, we all secretly knew that we were, if not immortal, then at least safe from ordinary death. The medics would come up with something to prevent all that. Life was going to be great, and even greater because we were leaving behind superstition. There was no cosmic rule book, and no God sitting in judgment on us. If I had gotten around to reading Dostoevsky, I would have agreed with his statement: "If there is no God, then anything is permitted."

I remember the first time I ever heard real atheism in practice. It was when David P, who was rumoured to have an un-recordably high IQ, stood up on a table during lunch break in the ninth grade and shouted, "There is no God! If there's a God, let him strike me dead!" He did it on a dare. The reward was a buck-fifty contributed by the rest of us.

Shock, horror. He expressed what we all privately thought, but were too timid to say out loud. But we all got away from the table, just in case. You never knew how inaccurate God might be with lightning bolts. The principal and teachers were staring at us with white lips. But all David got for his blasphemy was three days detention.

I can remember the glow of freedom that I felt then. But, like the chewing gum on the bedpost, it lost its flavour overnight. About the time I got to those years when you grow out of knowing everything there is to know, new questions began to disturb me.

After treading the familiar route through reading D T Suzuki, various gurus, sitting in Zen meditation and a long detour through a course of psychedelic drugs, I finally found myself back at the beginning. I was stuck with a single word, one which I hate to use, even now. You know the one I mean: **faith**.

Mostly, when people used that word, they meant something like swallowing your reason, putting your mind to sleep and hypnotising yourself into a kind of feeble belief structure that relies on denial to exist. Come on—we don't want brainwashing; we want proof. We inhabit a scientific age. We've grown up from the Dark Ages. Faith, schmaith.

I would still have felt the same way about it if I hadn't been forced into a Bible studies course in ministry training, when I finally found something that made sense to me. It was in the Book of Hebrews, which used to be ascribed to Paul, but was actually written several hundred years after his death. It is sometimes called the Unitarian book because it does away with a lot of the folderol from the earlier epistles. In chapter 11, it says:

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.”

That put a different face on things, at least for me. The writer of that book was saying that faith had nothing to do with shaky belief structures. It was “substance”. My online dictionary defines that word as *“the real physical matter of which a person or thing consists and which has a tangible, solid presence.”* And it is evidence: *“the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.”*

Well and good. But where is this substance and this evidence? We can inquire all the way back at the beginning of Western thought. Socrates used to talk about how most people were capable of hearing the muses speak to them. Not aloud, of course, but in an inner way. For muses read “the spirit”. What the muses told them was what made a life into more than a passing series of events. Their singing granted the most important gift—*meaning*. But not everyone could hear, or even wanted to listen for the muses. These people he called the *eu-a-moussoi*, or people content to live without a finely tuned inner connection with a reality that lies beyond the tedious succession of happenings that added up to nothing.

That means that all of us might have the ability to listen for the muses. Call it that if you like, or go Biblical and say the “still small voice”. Or maybe the word I sometimes use in place of the scary word “faith”, a *hunch*.

If the muses, or the Holy Spirit, are speaking to us, why can't we hear it all the time? As with most complex problems, there is no answer in kind. That is, there is no way to address a problem that has become so convoluted simply by subjecting it to the echo chamber of the mind.

For me, it would require something more than theory, and certainly more than the sort of fairy tale religion we got fed as kids. For me, it would have to be a perception, something that actually does speak to us through the cacophony of ideas that flutter around us like startled birds. Something, you might say, as audible as the referee's whistle when a foul is committed on the football field.

Maybe something, like this. [show dog whistle]. Oh, that doesn't work, does it? Do you think I should try to get my money back? And the whistle doesn't make a sound, does it? We are fully aware, thinking people. We know when something exists for real and when it doesn't. That's directly from the voices of our rational age. They might try to tell you that if something cannot be observed, cannot be weighed and measured, then it cannot exist. That's what happened to poor old God. They went looking for Him up in space and He wasn't there. They've been digging around in chunks of meat in the human brain and didn't find Him there, either.

And you know what? They're right, while being wrong. What they haven't taken into account, it seems to me, is the little matter of consciousness. We can only see what we have the equipment to see. We can only hear what we have the equipment to hear. We can only know what our limited brains can handle, too.

Some of you will know by now what my little whistle is. If Willow, the golden retriever of one of my church families were here today, she would have barked a few minutes ago. Because, yes, this is a dog whistle. It emits sounds that exceed our human range of 20 to 20,000 hertz, or vibrations per second. The whistle is very loud—audible to a dog or cat at a distance of one mile, in fact. The fact that we heard nothing does not mean that the sound did not exist; I've been tormenting local dogs in my neighbourhood all week.

Now I've just made a claim. You have a choice: you can believe it or not. Some of you know me, and most of you don't. Maybe you think, "Well, the guy IS a minister, after all, so he's probably not lying." But you don't know if I am deluded, maybe. Or doing a well-intentioned trick out of some misguided notion that I am doing you good.

We are faced with the same choices when we read the words of those great souls—people like Socrates and Rumi and Jesus and Ramakrishna. You can't prove what they say is true or false. You can take it or leave it. But if you take it, then everything begins to change. You are faced with the possibility that there is a whole new world that you need to attend to.

Then you can look for evidence. You can ask other people if they can hear the whistle. You can look around and see if your Collie cocks his ears at the sound and make inferences. Maybe you can pop it into a lab and try to measure the vibrations another way. What you cannot reasonably do is dismiss it as a childish myth.

But there is another way. You can learn to listen. When the frequency of the whistle gets tantalisingly close to our range, we can just about sense that a sound is being made. [Let me know when you can hear something.]

The closer we get to our range of hearing, the more likely it is that we can detect the sound. On the cusp of 20,000 Hz, we can begin to pick it up. Some of us will undoubtedly have a slightly more extended range than others, and so can hear it before we can. It may be that some of us are more likely than others to pick up the sound of the muses singing, too. When Rumi tells us of something he sees and hears, it's probably a good idea to believe him. The Rabbi Jesus too, maybe. Maybe the same thing even goes for shabby people talking aloud on the street. Listening is listening, after all.

But there are well-known ways of tuning in to the faint sounds of truth. When we have moments of intuition in meditation, or prayer, in a hymn, or even in a glimpse of sunlight out our window, we can sense—without really seeing—that something is near.

Something that we have never had to live without, that we could not live without. Something that has many names and none at all. Something that we can perceive, not merely theorise about. Something that makes faith an actuality, not a vain wish or, as some would try to tell us, a delusion.

It seems to me that it does boil down to a matter of consciousness. What are we aware of, and what goes unnoticed by us like passing scenery from a train window? If we could find a way to notice, really notice things, if we could find a way to listen when there is no audible sound, that would be the way to raise our consciousness. That's how we might learn to hear the muses sing.

Bark if you believe. Woof. Woof.

AMEN