

“God Doesn’t Count”

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The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
24 Fountain St., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
www.fountainstreet.org

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“God Doesn’t Count”

Now Where Were We?

It has been almost a month since my last installment on liberal theology. They would not take so long if I did one each week, but this is tough stuff, guaranteed to make you either sleepy or cranky. In the month between the last one and this much has gone on. I’ve been to California and back, with an extra day because of a last big snow storm here. I met Jennifer Hudson and her Oscar on my rescheduled flight. Gave her my card and asked her to sing here anytime she wants. Scooter Libby was convicted, in a long tradition of underlings sacrificed for a higher cause. (I imagine the prosecutor is worried about his job right now.) The war in Iraq is now four years old, longer than the Civil War, and both World Wars. The surge now extends into Afghanistan, but we can take some comfort from the excellent care they will get at home, like at Walter Reed Hospital. The campaign is in full swing, as I said last week. So I threw my own hat into the fight for Vice President. No one really wants the job, it’s nothing but funerals and meetings and rubber chicken dinners. Right up my alley, though. More on that later.

What got me this week was a poll that says voters are more likely to choose a president based on character than policy. I thought about this and here’s what came up: Who would make the better leader – a man who smoked, drank, philandered and lied, or a man who was vegetarian, teetotaling, chaste and truthful? The first describes Franklin Roosevelt and the second Adolf Hitler.

In the midst of all this I am laying out the basics of liberal theology. I started this work six years ago, but life intervened until a young woman from a local evangelical school, who saw me speak to her class last year, sent me a letter that asked me to explain what I did believe and why I did not believe as she did.

I decided to start over, and make it less of a treatise and more of a letter. Even then I found it hard to do, and when a task is hard for no apparent reason, chances are there is something in your life standing in the way. That’s when I happened on a book about St. Augustine in which the author claims that until Augustine wrote his confessions he could not make his professions. Maybe I need to do the same, reveal my personal and spiritual trials. And this too needed to be a letter, as Augustine wrote to God. But in my case it was necessary to think of an actual person as a stand-in, just as the young woman who receives my profession is a stand in for you.

So far I have written four letters each. In my confession I have gone from birth to age nine. In my profession I have covered ontology, epistemology, and human nature. This time I shall turn over the rock of my adolescence and peer into the enigma of God. Both are pretty weird. To get us started, I have some powerful words from some great minds to start the juices flowing.

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe...the starry heavens above and the moral law within. I have not to search for them and conjecture them as though they were veiled in darkness or were in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence. - Immanuel Kant

A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Confession

Dear distant friend,

What a blessing it is to have those who endure our squalid ways. I look back on the years leading into adulthood and see a shameful wake of deeds done for spite, formed out of petty malice, pursued in vain hopes of revenge or the truly painful acts of someone in love with self-pity. These I could report, but have not the courage even to say them to myself. But equally, I see deeds undone, whether because of laziness or envy or doubt or fear. These truly outnumber all my sins of commission. In fact, when I consider them together, the ledger is far longer on the sniveling side than on the swagger. In the end, I probably did as much wrong as any boy, but enjoyed it far less. And if one is to be bad, denying the pleasure in the sin makes it truly pitiful.

As I said before, we moved the summer when I was nine, a move that probably left me off balance ever after. Whenever I could, and as a teenager I often did, I returned to my original haunts hoping to find a sense of belonging there that did not find me in my new home. Ultimately, I lived in each place nine years, but Baltimore was never my home. I felt torn from my spot on the earth and unclothed in that new world where I did not belong. I have ever felt a wanderer in life. No place I have ever lived has felt like home. They are all places I have lived, and often places I have loved to live. But none are home, the place I belong.

As I told you, a vivid memory from that time is being left in charge of my younger brother of seven as my mother visited a new shopping mall in our new town. She left us to enjoy the clowns and games provided for the occasion, but I could not. So I searched far and wide, to both her and my brother's deep frustration, until I found her and was safe again. An odd blessing I got from this urgent need to know where things are is a keen sense of direction and a fine memory for places. I would make a fine taxi driver.

An unfortunate product of feeling naked and vulnerable was to hide under blankets of intellect, self pity and fat. Food was my most reliable friend. As puberty roared to life I fed it voraciously, stopping at Otterbein's bakery on the way home from school

most days for a 50 cent éclair. I grew taller but wider. My chin grew soft while my friends grew whiskers. I still appeared the boy while they became men. And I hated myself more each day, unable to see how to change. My tactic of hiding in plain sight had become a prison of my own making but which I could not fathom how to escape. At age sixteen I was verging on 250 pounds. If I was ashamed before, I was mortified now.

How curious that such a small amount of time and such a small struggle could so determine my nature. No doubt there is far more here than I am saying, but it is clearer now that I was very lonely at a key moment in my life, and unable to grasp it fully. Ignorance of myself led to years of struggle and left a mark I feel as keenly now as the scars from that bicycle fall at age eight. Once again fear gripped me, and in its grip I hid, covered, fled, hoping it would go away. Ashamed of my cowardice, I hid even deeper, even from myself. I am still climbing out of that cell.

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Profession

My young friend,

What about God? This is where people want to start, but as you now realize, God is a conclusion not a premise. I needed to go through all that other stuff - the unity of the reality, our human limits in understanding it, before talking about God. Great theologians have done this much over and over, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin most notably. What makes me different is that I said that good religion does not need God, and for at least one rather ironic reason: we cannot really know any outside revelation from a supernatural God because we are incapable of complete and accurate perception.

Let me be blunt. Believing in God does not matter. It does not matter to the person who carefully seeks to live rightly, and it does not matter to God. You see, if there is no God, it is useless to believe; and if there is a God, the only God worth believing in does not need to be believed in. I say, it is ungodly of God to care whether we believe. Religiously speaking, God doesn't count.

But does this mean God is useless? If God is not necessary to living rightly, whether God exists or not, why even think about God? Because no wise person would reject God if God could be shown to be useful to our human task better. This is what I propose to show, that it is sensible to believe in God because we benefit by doing so. It is not necessary at all, but I believe the great surmise makes more sense with God than without.

But what sort of God could there be that does not need to be believed and yet would be useful to believe? The place to start, it may seem ironic, is with Paul, the apostle whose epistles are part of the Christian Bible. He uses an analogy to explain the church that I think really describes this new sort of God. He stumbles onto some-

thing that even he does not recognize.

“For just as the body is one and has many members... all the members of the body, though many, are one body...” Actually, Plato anticipated this centuries before in his *Timaeus* dialogue, where he off-handedly noted that God is to the universe as the mind is to the body. Now, jump forward to the 20th century, when Alfred North Whitehead created a philosophy of organism, and his disciple, Charles Hartshorne drew it into a complete theory. Informed by two millennia of science and what we know about DNA and stem cells and the brain, we are part of an organism, not just separate individuals in a world. Just as we know more about how our mind and body are connected, so there could be a cosmic mind that is aware of us even if we are not aware of it.

This all sounds very abstract and ethereal, but it is not. You and I know about our eyes and ears, and skin. We sense our muscles and bones and organs. Cells in our hand cannot know cells in our feet, even that they exist, but the mind is aware of them, sensing them and making a living whole from the many parts. And though cells are born and die, we continue. The entity called a person transcends the cells that comprise it. How it happens is mysterious, but there is no denying it.

Analogies are risky, I know. How do I know this is not simply anthropomorphism at a more exalted level, projecting human character onto the inhuman. But I abolished the human uniqueness argument earlier. Whatever we are is of the same essence as everything else. Our minds cannot be exceptions to the rest of reality.

A God that is the universal mind is not irrational, but does this God exist, and how does believing in this God benefit us? We cannot know, any more than the dust mites that live in my eyelashes or the *escheria coli* bacteria that live in my gut know I exist. We cannot know if this God actually exists. But we benefit by believing so because we are creatures whose actions transform things. Our choices as sentient beings have impact beyond those creatures with less consciousness. Consider that the six billion humans, a paltry number compared to other species and the whole biomass, have radically altered the planet. Such is the power of free choice, good and evil. How shall we make wise choices, those less likely to inhibit and harm and more likely to encourage and enhance? That depends on making informed choices, deliberate and thoughtful choices with the fullest range of knowledge considered. It means, in short, making choices with more than ourselves in mind.

Our powers imply a duty beyond ourselves. Thus while sound religion begins as humanism, it cannot be merely humanism. If we live as though there is nothing more important than us, that the universe is some vast inert place, then it will be inert, and lonely, and meaningless. The mind must reach for wider realms of meaning and truth – goodness itself, truth itself, beauty itself – or feel a profound existential uselessness.

The idea of God as the cosmic mind serves these purposes. By pointing us toward a wider context for our own being, one that gives us both humility about our limits and magnanimity about our powers, the idea of God as the divine mind is good. This the-

ism is preferable to atheism because mere humanism, meaning atheism, is not sufficient to the task of being human.

This can be true only if God is the cosmic mind, and everything in the universe is part of the cosmic body. A God outside, wholly other, of a different nature and being, cannot serve this purpose because it cannot inspire us to learn or grow. Such a God is not worth believing in, as it alienates us from the universe and renders us helpless or useless. Such a vision I think needs to be abandoned, no matter how charming and familiar and comforting.

Now, let's see if this God can do for us what the old God did.

This God gives the universe value.

God as cosmic mind allows us to see love and beauty and justice as present in the universe just as it is present in us. Our bodies do not know these things, and animals seem not to sense them. So it is our minds that find these qualities, but if our minds are exceptional, then goodness and truth and beauty are exceptional themselves. God as divine mind puts beauty, love and justice into reality itself. A universe with a mind has value, not just substance.

Another way to look at it would be this: The universe as a whole must be at least as smart as I am. The alternative is also rather dismal.

This God gives us purpose.

Returning to the analogy of mind to body, while we care very much for our bodies and are aware of all the time, what any individual cell thinks of us never enters our minds. No benevolent wishes any of them might make ever enters our inner ear, nor does any evil thought in them arouse us to wrath. They are part of us.

Just so, God has no interest in whether we think about God or not. Our believing does not make God happy, nor our disbelieving unhappy. Our beliefs are of no divine consequence. It is whether we serve the whole that matters. Our actions count, not our beliefs.

This God gives us direction.

Just as our task as humans is to unite truth with love, so God as cosmic mind carries this out on a cosmic level. When we are born we have no form or direction at all, but are pure potential. With the help of others, we gradually turn our potentiality into actuality, "growing a soul," as I have said. So, we can reason analogically, the same coaxing and guiding could take place at a larger scale. God turns potential into actual, uniting truth and love on a cosmic scale. We can even say that this is what the universe is about, and we are but one part of it. God is growing the soul of the universe.

The idea of God therefore gives us immortality.

I shall explore this more fully later, but for now, let us admit that cosmic mind by definition immeasurably precedes and follows our particular. If we are part of that mind, even for a while, then we are part of that larger mind. To use another anatomical analogy, think of our lives as moments in the mind of God. We know our thoughts are not merely experiences, but actually create pathways through the brain and leave a trail that was not there before. The firing of that particular path of neurons may last but a millisecond, but it paves the way for later ones and for combinations of new thoughts that needed it to be there before.

So when we live, trying to find our way through the difficult choices that freedom both allows and requires, our lives help form the mind of God and in this way, even when the life we live is over, the path remains. As we can at times recall with intense clarity and fullness moments of our past, so our lives remain perpetually etched in the mind of God.

This God is not as interesting as the usual one, doing no miracles or promising fantastic eternities. This God will not come to your personal aid, nor strike down your enemies, or in any sense govern the world around us. But how rich and broad and lively our lives can be with this idea of God. It is, as others would say, a value-added transaction. We live our lives better when we know they matter to the universe. In a sense, I have reversed the usual notion of us depending on God. In my universe, God literally depends on us. Think hard and tell me which God is more inspiring in the long run?

Wishing you the blessings of life renewed as the seasons change again, I am,

Your friend...