

Sermon for 30 January 2011
Epiphany 4, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

A few years ago I attended a lecture given by the philosopher Daniel Dennett. Dennett, who focuses on the philosophical implications of evolutionary biology and cognitive science, was promoting his new book, titled *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Dennett is considered a part of the contemporary movement known as "the new atheism" along with the likes of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. You've likely seen (or perhaps even read) some of this group's more popular books, *The God Delusion* and *God Is Not Good* being the most famous.

Anyway, in his lecture, Dennett presented an example from biology as an analogy for man's religious impulse. Apparently, ants are susceptible to a kind of brain parasite called the lancet fluke.

The fluke burrows its way into the ant's brain and gives its host an irrational compulsion to climb up to the top of a blade of grass. As the ant approaches the top, having been strangely compelled to climb toward the sun, it is unceremoniously consumed by a passing cow, and the lancet fluke finds its final host as the ant is digested.

This, Dennett claimed, is like religion. He goes further than saying that religion is a beneficial evolutionary adaptation, a function of socio-biology. That idea's been around a long time, and it can even be reconciled with a faith perspective if approached with more reflection than is possible within the scope of this particular sermon. Dennett actually claims something far more radical. He claims that religion is a detriment to evolutionary fitness, that it's like a parasite that makes us ascend to wherever we have convinced ourselves we'll find God—up the blade of grass to the sun—only to be swallowed up: perhaps a fitting

punishment for falling prey to such an insidious delusion.

As people of faith we will, no doubt, disagree with Dennett's assessment. Even so, I think it's important that we recognize that his estimation of religion is by no means his alone. There are smart people out there who have given a lot of thought to the nature of faith and have determined that religious faith is inherently harmful. The new atheists have been successful in selling their books, Bill Maher's controversial anti-Christian propaganda piece *Religulous* is the seventh highest grossing documentary film of all time, and statistics show that there are around 12 million atheists (not agnostics, *atheists*) in the U.S., and that the numbers are even worse in other Western nations.

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing," says St. Paul, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." We must

recognize that that which gives our lives meaning is reckoned foolish by much of the world, and that the proper response to this reality is not to feel threatened. Most of us would like to be considered intelligent, but to what lengths will we go to be reckoned wise by the world's standards, especially when our faith may be considered by some to be a handicap?

About a year ago, there was a bit of a flap over President Obama's appointment of Francis Collins as director of the National Institutes of Health. The problem, as it turned out, was Collins' public affirmation of his Christian faith. He is by no means a radical or a fundamentalist, just your run-of-the-mill committed Christian person, but, as an article in the New York Times put it "many scientists regard outspoken religious commitment as a sign of mild dementia". Now, I suspect the article was probably a bit hyperbolic, but there is at least a significant part of the population who

cannot see a committed Christian as being potentially intelligent enough to be a leader in the scientific field (there are at least a couple in our parish whom, I think, would take issue with this assessment).

What it all comes down to, as far as I can tell, is the limited nature of the world's definition of knowledge. I have said from this pulpit before that in the study of epistemology—that is, the study of how we know what we know—the prevailing consensus is that reason and observation are the only two means available to the human mind for acquiring knowledge. The Christian will protest that truths about God can be known just as fully by other means, namely by *faith*. Paul calls this means of knowledge a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. In our context, faith can be a stumbling block to the logician and folly to the scientist, “but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks (to logicians

and scientists and the simple alike), Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

I said earlier that we cannot be threatened by the growing derision with which our faith is held. We cannot be threatened by the Daniel Dennetts and Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens of the world because we know that we are justified by the true power and wisdom of God. We are promised that though we are not wise by their standards, our folly, our absolutely silly insistence that we can know that which we cannot see, will shame the wisdom of the wise.

So, let's revel in our folly. Let's be fools for Christ, crazy for God. Instead of being threatened by those this world sees as wise, let's embrace the fact that what we are can seem to be nuts. Let's get over the self-consciousness, the embarrassment we can feel when our commitment to Christ is seen as a bit odd in some of the circles in which we run. Embrace that oddness. Christ never

said the Christian path would be respectable, he said it was the way of life and joy and peace. I don't know about you, but I'll take life and joy and peace over respectability any day.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.