

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 21, 2016  
Sermon Title: The Soul of Atheism  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

## Luke 19:1-10

*He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'*

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## Introduction

Today's sermon is about "atheism," which needs some clarification of terms. Atheism is a Greek word that literally means "*without belief in God.*" "Theism" is *belief*; "A" is *without*. So "A-theism" is *without such belief*. And yes, there are people who have sat down, thought it through, and reasoned their opinion: no God. It's also true that a lot of atheists are actually "agnostic," another Greek word, "gnostic," *knowledge*. "Agnostic," *without knowledge*. You don't know if there is a God. Often times, I talk with atheists, and when I ask them about their certainty that there is no God, they say, well, they're not certain, they're not sure, and they realize they're really agnostic—they don't know. Rather than atheist—dead certain, no God.

In my experience, and I emphasize that I'm talking about *my* experience, most atheists are actually angry—angry with God or God's representatives,

Churches or clergy. The failure of God or the silence of God or the out-and-out badness of what is done in God's name make people say, "NO." No to religion, no to God, no to Church.

Three weeks ago, I started presenting to you my new book. It is a book that captures my life, my world, lived almost entirely connected to Church. And in the book, I lie out my vision of what Church really, really can be, of Church at its best, Church done right.

There are a lot of things in life that when they're great, they're really great; but when they're mediocre, they're really just bad. A great steak is a great steak. A mediocre steak is bad. Pizza, brownies, cappuccino, a book, a movie, a concert, a Broadway play: I want it done right, or I don't want it.

The Bible reserves its greatest disgust for Churches that aren't done right; it calls them "lukewarm." In the Book of Revelation, God talks about seven types of Church, and when it comes to the "lukewarm Church," God says, "I wish you were either hot or cold, but since you're just lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth." There's hardly anything we treasure that's just O.K., passable, fair to middling. There's nothing in life, career, family, where we strive for mediocrity. And mediocre Church isn't going to cut it, so I'm offering a lifetime of lessons to encourage Church. Our Church. Any Church. To be the best we can be.

Today, to be blunt, this is the most important sermon. It draws heavily from Chapter 4, "Atheism, Art, and Inness." So here's the blunt part. Either this sermon works, and the book does lots of good; or, the sermon fails, the book is dead. And it, and the Church, all end up in the remainder bin some day, the book discounted to a dollar, the Church discounted to a vestigial organ. (I actually looked that up: "vestigial organ." It's something that used to be valuable, but no more. When I Googled it, one definition was "useless leftovers.") That's NOT us.

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## **Sermon**

My chapter on atheism begins with a poem I wrote after a conversation with a young artist. I met him at a difficult time when we were planning the funeral for a young man, and we had gathered some of his friends together to help us. During the course of the conversation, this young man mentioned that he was an artist, and we started talking about art. I mentioned that I had been surprised to discover that my favorite artist was an atheist. The young man said, "Well, maybe he wasn't really an artist; it is hard to be an

artist and an atheist." The comment rolled around my read for a couple of years, finally emerging as this poem when I was writing this chapter."

***The Atheist and the Artist***  
***(Psalm 14:1)***

*a fool's heart  
is  
devoid of God  
the artist's  
art  
fills the void  
an atheist  
knows  
no creation by creator!  
no design by designer?  
that which is done  
is not done  
by anyone.  
the artist  
knows  
the divine spark  
blending here with there  
creates the art  
what's done is done  
by someone  
for each  
creation is a miraculous reach  
something from nothing, or  
nothing from something.*

The Bible says, "The fool in his heart has said there is no God." (Psalm 14:1) I don't know about that, although in the grand scheme of things, it's probably wiser to believe in God. I think it was Bertrand Russell, the great British philosopher and a self-described "popular" atheist, who provided this argument for faith. He said it's wiser to believe in God because if there is a God, you're all set, and if there isn't a God, you haven't lost anything; but if you don't believe in God, and there is a God, you're in trouble. So in effect, it's foolish NOT to believe in God. I learned that in logic class at Queens College in 1965. Still, I don't think atheists are fools.

My experience with atheists begins with 8<sup>th</sup>-graders. I've been teaching Confirmation class to 8<sup>th</sup>-graders for almost 50 years. The class always

begins in September, and every September, there are always a couple of kids who declare, "I am an atheist."

We don't mock them or criticize them or burn them at the stake or put them in stocks on the town square. And we don't patronize them or humor them. We welcome them. And love them. And see what happens. They're not fools. Mostly, they're rebelling. They don't want to come to Church on Sundays, they don't want to sit in another class on Mondays, they don't want to get dressed up for Confirmation in May, they don't want to do what everyone else is doing just because everyone else is doing it. And they're not all that happy with their parents, their coaches, their teachers, or adults in general. Truth is, I meet atheists all year long, and they're not fools. They arrive at their conviction the same way we do: a thousand, a million different paths to belief or unbelief.

My conversion story begins with getting kicked out of college at the height of the Vietnam War. My college didn't want me; even the army didn't want me. My father got me a job giving away free Bibles all over New York City. That led to surprising encounters, good and bad, loving and violent, with people who loved the Bible. That kind of over-the-top passion aroused me out of my teenage apathy toward religion. It kind of slapped me in the face and said, "You need to look at this stuff more closely." After one of those more dramatic encounters, I found myself late at night expressing my confusion. "Dear God," I said out loud to no one in particular, "Dear God, if you exist (and I don't think you do) . . . ." And I have no idea what I said after that, but as you can see, my first step toward conversion was some kind of atheism: "Dear God, if you exist (and I don't think you do) . . . ."

Of course, that's the paradox of atheism. We shout at someone who *isn't*. Most atheists I've encountered are angry, hurt, disappointed. They're angry at some Church, they've been hurt by some clergy, they're disappointed in God. Those are strong feelings: anger, hurt, disappointment; and they get expressed passionately, whether it's the great atheist authors of today lambasting the sins of religion, quite accurately; or me, whining at God, "If you exist (and I don't think you do)." My atheism was entirely selfish. I had made a mess of my life all by myself; therefore, I decided there is no God.

Now that's a fool. But now, atheists are far more grounded in reality. They look at the harshness of life, they look at the indiscriminate evil in the world, they look at the suffering that seems to attack the most innocent, they look at the sins done by religion of every kind, they look at the weakness and failure of religion to end the evils or right the wrongs. And often, it gets more personal. Somebody dies. Somebody gets sick. Somebody has an accident. Somebody can't catch a break. There are natural disasters, "Acts of God," we call them. There are individual tragedies. There are blatant

injustices. All those lead people to say, "Where is God?" "What kind of God would do this?" "What kind of God would allow this?" "How can there even be a God?" And they shake their fists, they wag their finger, they raise their voices at something they say is not there. That's the irony of atheism. And that's why I call this sermon "The Soul of Atheism." Atheists have a soul. It is wounded, it is hurting, it is broken, it is angry, it is disappointed, but it's still alive.

Well, obviously, I came to terms with my youthful 1965 atheism. I became a Christian. I became a pastor. I've been doing Church work since 1968. I love it, so I must have found something here. And I have had to come to terms with every single one of the angers, hurts, and disappointments that drive people out of Church, away from Church, toward atheism.

Atheism as a phenomenon has caught everyone's attention. It probably began with the Russian Revolution and "Godless Communism," with officially atheist countries like Albania and China scaring us. Then Madeline Murray O'Hare convinced the Supreme Court to outlaw public prayer in public schools, and ever since, we've blamed every problem in America on that.

More recently, atheists have gotten more organized, more aggressive, they buy full-page ads in newspapers, they have huge billboards and posters in subways, poking fun at religion *and* advocating for atheism-based morality, with slogans like "You don't have to believe in God to be good."

There are even atheist Churches. Remember, I told you a few weeks ago that Church only means "gathering," and atheists are gathering. They have a sort of liturgy, with hymns and all the trimmings of religion. More and more people identify as atheist, or as "Nones," as in "none of the above," when asked for their religious preference. None. "Atheist" has become the catchall phrase for everybody who has turned against religion, who has walked away from Church, who has a beef with God.

But they're not the enemy. For most of my life, the Christian Church has looked at creeping atheism as a growing threat. We couch it in different terms: leftist Hollywood, liberal college professors, TV or music or politicians that we don't like. They all get lumped together as this giant monolithic bad guy: atheist. We need somebody to blame. We never stop to think what we have done to push people out of Church. And we never stop to think, really think, about the atheist.

This changed for me in a big way two years ago. I read about this Catholic priest in Prague, Tomáš Halík, and his sort of one-man revival of Christianity in Central Europe's least religious country. A few months later, the Fernandeses gave us their Okemo condo for a week in the summer, so I

decided to read Tomáš Halík but couldn't get any of his books. Alida managed to find one for a Kindle, so I'm sitting on top of a mountain reading an e-book on a Kindle, wanting to underline every word, dog-ear every page, but I didn't know how yet (I learned later that it is possible). It was so frustrating.

Well, Ludlow, Vermont, has this wonderful little homegrown independent bookstore, and when I told the owner my plight, he spent two days tracking down a Halík book, even autographed. I had only to sell one of our children to pay for it, but I got it. I have to tell you, he has changed my life. There's a lot about him in the book, so I won't get into it much now. Let me just say that I admire him so much that when Alida was doing all the editing of the book, she stayed up late one night finishing it off, and she printed out a finished copy, put it in a binder, put a photo of Halík and me on the cover, and retitled the book *Tomáš and Me*.

Thanks to Alida, last April I was able to meet with Halík in his Church in Prague. In his bustling, thriving Church, in his Church full of college kids and young adults on a Sunday night, and in the middle of the week in a 700-year-old Catholic Church. Something's going on there.

Here's the big deal. Halík's book is about today's Scripture, the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a low-level crook, a sort of low-level IRS agent, working for the Romans, ripping off his own people. Yet, when Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is coming to town, he goes down to the main road, climbs up a tree, the better to hide, *and* the better to see. The Bible actually says, "Zacchaeus was seeking to see who Jesus was." "Seeking to see." "*Seeking*."

When Jesus comes along, Jesus amazed everybody. He sees Zacchaeus up in a tree. He calls him by name. He invites himself to Zacchaeus's house for dinner. He doesn't berate him, mock him, ignore him, or condemn him. Jesus respects him, affirms him, acknowledges him, befriends him. And out of this surprising relationship that breaks all the rules of religion, Zacchaeus becomes a new man.

"There," says Tomáš Halík, "there is the atheist." Zacchaeus. Cool and detached, yes. Above it all, removed, yes. On the edge, the periphery, outside. Curious, but hesitant. Hidden, but not resistant. Hidden, really, in plain sight. Up a tree, but interested. Seeking. To see. Seeking to see Jesus. Seeking to see who Jesus was. Wanting to know. Wanting to be known.

Let me offer this quote you will find on page 64. It's worth the price of the book, and it's not even by me. It's by Tomáš Halík:

*“Too often our approach is to be dismissive of those who dismiss us, to reject those who reject us, to keep at a distance those who choose to be distant from us.*

*Halík chooses to echo Jesus’s Beatitudes, adding an extra one, ‘Blessed are the distant,’ and dares us to ‘warm that which is cold, moisten that which is dry . . . bring closer that which is distant.’” (Halík, Tomáš. *Patience with God*. Doubleday, 2009. 11)*

My challenge to you is this: look in the trees, see who is hiding in plain sight, waiting . . . waiting . . . .

We all know somebody who has given up on Church, on religion, on God; somebody who is hurting or angry or disappointed; somebody who is shaking a fist at heaven, shouting, “Dear God, if you exist (and I don’t think you do) . . .” and hoping for an answer, yearning . . . Maybe you’re an answer to their prayer. Maybe this book is part of the answer, or one chapter, or one story.

I’m emboldened to push you to push the book by something that unfolded this week. Our whole community has been heartsick by the tragedy with the Andrews family, a horror beyond all comprehension. The day it happened, Alida sent out a pastoral letter and a prayer, first to our Church. Then she posted the prayer on Facebook. And that prayer has now been viewed 45,000 times.

A little prayer from a little Church in the middle of nowhere, viewed 45,000 times. Stop to think about that. Usually we’re all nervous about sharing matters of faith, even with people we know, maybe especially with people we know. We don’t want to offend. Maybe that person is turned off of religion. Or is an atheist or a “none of the above” or a “Hollywood liberal,” or a college student. We can always come up with an excuse to hide away our Church.

But this week, people saw a prayer on Facebook that some friend had “liked” and decided to read. And when they’d read it, they “liked” it too, which all their friends noticed. And then several hundred of them clicked on “share” and put the prayer out to the world, and before you knew it, in three days, 45,000 people had read our prayer.

And here’s what you and I both know. Of those 45,000, not all of them are in Church today. Many, maybe most of them, are up a tree, hiding, waiting, secretly “seeking to see who Jesus was.” They’re there. They are there, right close by. Waiting. All Jesus did was notice him, call him by name, sit with him. Love him.

In a humble way, and I mean this in all sincerity, in an absolutely humble way, I offer my book to you as a way to say to the Zacchaeuses in your life, "Hi, I see you there. I know you. Come down. Join me. Let's walk together a bit."

And now, let us join together to sing Hymn No. 546, "Amazing Grace."

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace first taught my heart to fear  
and grace my fears relieved;  
how precious did that grace appear  
the hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,  
I have already come;  
'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
and grace will lead me home.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years,  
bright shining as the sun,  
we've no less days to sing God's praise  
than when we'd first begun.*