

HEARTBEATS- Staying Connected 8/20/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

One of the wonderful examples that Jesus sets for us is that of meeting people where they are at and then helping them to move closer to God. When He healed, Jesus never asked if the person was a believer, though often they became believers through the healings. When He met people who were in a state of sin (actually everyone with whom He spoke was), He asked questions or gently challenged them to help them discover more about their relationship with God.

Some years ago, I was visiting a member of the congregation at her home. As she walked me outside, her high school-aged grandson came out of the house. She introduced me to him as her pastor.

His first words to me were, “Oh, I’m an atheist.”

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit put some words in my mouth and I said, “I don’t believe in atheists.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I said, “The definition of an atheist is ‘someone who doesn’t believe in anything.’”

“I believe in stuff!” he said somewhat defensively.

“See,” I said. “you’re not an atheist. You’re an agnostic.”

Suddenly smiling, the young man said, “Oh. Thanks!” and off he went.

I never got to talk to him again, but if I had I would have asked him to tell me about the things he does believe in. Finding out what was important to him would have been a next step in continuing a conversation that might lead to a discussion about God. Searching out the source of that which he valued might have been an avenue to talking about where those values come from and, eventually, to where his identity and worth as a person most finds its foundation—specifically God.

I could have dismissed him when he claimed to be an atheist. I could have condemned him or attacked his identity or sought to try to save him in that moment. (I know some who would have immediately asked, “If you were to die tonight, do you know that you would go to heaven?” That question, which is often off-putting when asked, would have meant nothing to one claimed not to believe in God.) Hopefully, by meeting him where his self-perception was and then carefully moving it just a bit, the door was opened to him shifting a tad more toward God.

When we meet new people and show an interest in who they are and what matters to them, we begin to open the door to questions about who they are and what they believe. Taking time to come to know them can lead to deeper conversation about their thoughts about God and church and faith. Judgment closes doors to discussion. Trying to get them to where we think they need to be presumes that we know what is best for them. Instead, we would do well to just get to know them. Meet them where they are at. Look for opportunities to ask questions or caringly challenge their thinking. When done in love and concern for the other person, the Holy Spirit is able to work through us to move them closer to where God wants them to be.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey