

A couple weeks ago Ivan Shuler gave me a transcript from an interview with Ryan Bell, who used to be a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. In 2014 he did a blog called, "Year Without God," and he has since become an atheist. (Don't confuse Ryan Bell with Rob Bell, the more famous independent pastor.) Ryan Bell is very articulate in the interview and presents atheism in a very constructive light. This could be troublesome to some people; but I think it both gives an opportunity for a person of Christian beliefs to grow, and also to understand the thoughts of an atheist. You know well that if you are ever going to be successful at evangelizing to someone you first have to get to know them. You have to listen to them.

Bell is asked a question, "What's one thing you wish more Christians knew about atheists?" He replies, "I wish more Christians knew that atheists are not nihilists [that is, total rejection of laws and institutions] who have no meaning to their lives or people with no moral compass. They're not stubbornly rejecting God. All the atheists I have met have seriously hit a brick wall while trying to know God."

Elsewhere he said, "I think the best way I can explain the conclusion I've come to - and conclusion is too strong a word for the provisional place I now stand and work from - is that the intellectual and emotional energy it takes to figure out how God fits into everything is far greater than dealing with reality as it presents itself to us.

"That probably sounds very nonrational, and I want people to know that I have read several dozen books and understand a good many of the arguments. I'd just say that the existence of God seems like an extra layer of complexity that isn't necessary. The world makes more sense to me as it is, without postulating a divine being who is somehow in charge of things."

(Internet transcript of interview, *Huffington Post*, "After a Year Without God, Former Pastor Ryan Bell No Longer Believes.")

I have a feeling Ryan Bell's thoughts go for a lot of atheists, and they give us a good platform to interpret our gospel reading for today.

I think we get our Christian faith backwards when we use it as a way to try to figure out God; or even come to a greater sense of what God is up to. Many Christians use their faith the same way eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism do - as a path toward greater enlightenment and spiritual awakening. I want to say that if spiritual disciplines and discernment help to make you more at peace with yourself and it brings you greater fulfillment in life, that's great! These things can be very beneficial. But they aren't the core of Christian faith, and they aren't for everyone.

Similarly we get Christian faith backwards when we think that God has a divinely ordained purpose for our lives and our goal is to figure out what it is and then live it. But again, spiritual discernment can be very helpful, but it is not for everyone. There's nothing wrong with you - or your faith - if you wake up every morning saying, "God, what do you want me to do today?" and then you don't get an answer; in fact never get an answer. That's not the core of a Christian life.

Ryan Bell appears to be exhausting himself trying to figure out God. Christian faith would suggest not doing that, because

that isn't essential. We profess that God has already revealed everything we need to know about God. I feel like a broken record when I say it, but God has revealed that his ultimate nature is love. This is not a love driven by desire, but a love driven by self-giving. God gave of himself for us. Jesus often uses the image of the love between a parent and a child. A good parent wants what's best for the child and often gives deeply for the child's best interest.

Our gospel reading flips the idea of figuring out God on its head. We are reading from early in the Gospel of John and Jesus is calling his first disciples. He's already called Peter and Andrew and our verses pick up with Jesus calling Philip. What is the first thing Philip does? He goes and tells Nathaniel. He says, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was a backwater no-place-ville. It had no prominence or prestige. If you were from Nazareth you wouldn't go bragging about it. Perhaps this hits too close to home, but it would be

as if Nathanael had said, "Can anything good come out of Hunt's Trailer Park?" You get the derisiveness in his tone?

Let's pause for a moment and consider Ryan Bell's struggles to figure out God and ask ourselves how much this soon-to-be-a-disciple-of-Jesus knows about God? Not much!

Nathanael goes along with Philip to meet Jesus anyway. When Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him we discover a part of life that we often forget - how much Jesus knows about Nathanael. Jesus says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael, in disbelief asks, "Where did you get to know me?" And Jesus' answer reveals more knowledge, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Perhaps we struggle to figure out God. But God has us fully figured out!

Perhaps it is disconcerting to think that while you cannot begin to figure out God, God knows everything there is about you. God knows your every thought and action. God even knows

those thoughts that go through your head which are, "I'd better not think about that because I don't want God to know." Oops, too late! God knows that one too.

Perhaps part of the reason why some atheists reject God is because they reject the idea of being known so well. I hope we can take the opposite approach - to see God's infinite knowledge as a blessing and not something to be feared.

Have you ever reflected back on the past and wondered why you did what you did in that moment? Or maybe you've thought, "If I knew then what I know today I'd do something totally different." Also, I'm sure we all have things in our past that we look at and just can't figure out:

Why did that happen? It just makes no sense.

Why did that relationship fail?

Why did I get the job when someone more qualified didn't?

Why did I survive when the person right next to me was killed?

Or perhaps a different line of thought - I find myself doing this as a parent with my children. You look at a person and think, "I wish I could figure out what is going on in your mind

right now. Then I'd know what to do or what to say or how to act."

Rarely can you come up with answers to things like this. In time you learn that you just can't dwell on it too much because sometimes there are no answers.

The good news is for us is that God does know us. Maybe we can't make sense of something that happened in the past. Maybe we can't figure out what someone else is thinking; but our all-knowing God can and does.

Rather than letting trying to figure out God and what God's up to be a huge burden, you take comfort in knowing that all is known by God and all is in God's hands.

I started with some quotes from an atheist. I want to end with a quote from Pope John Paul II. Supposedly it was his bedtime prayer, and it is a good one considering the weight of the job of being the pope. He would pray, "God, this is your church, not mine. I'm tired. Good night." Amen