

Sunday, May 17, 2020
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Acts 17.22-31; John 14.15-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/677126449786502/>

(Sermon begins at about 14:00)

“Seeking the One in Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being”

As I ponder our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, I am struck by the similarities between first century Athenians and us 21st century Americans. In Paul’s oration to the Athenians, we see rich imagery and theological truths that still speak to us 2,000 years later.

At the time of Paul’s visit, Athens was the intellectual center of the world, home of some of humanity’s greatest schools of philosophical thought. The city was also filled with monuments and altars to the various Greek gods, indicating a rich religious life. As a result, there was a tension between the religious aspect of Athenian society—worship of the pantheon of gods—and philosophical exploration, which was often at odds with or pushing up against the religious culture.

In this complicated philosophical and religious landscape, Paul observes an altar dedicated “to an unknown god.” The fact that the Athenians erected a monument to an unknown god indicates something of the way the people approached their religious life. While they were religious, they remained tentative in the way they sought relationship with their gods. This altar to an unknown god seems to indicate a respectful recognition of the possibility of the existence of a deity who had been accidentally overlooked. Perhaps the Athenians were sophisticated enough to know that there were gods or at least some dimensions of deity that extend beyond the human capacity to know or understand. So, they were covering their bases, recognizing that there may be other gods who had not (yet) revealed themselves. In creating space for the unknown god, maybe they simply sought to placate the divine, as if to ask forgiveness for their possible omission.

Or, maybe their spiritual sensibilities recognized that their established gods were not at all sufficient. Perhaps this drove the Athenians beyond the pantheon of known deities toward that which could truly satisfy, and yet remained just beyond reach. Maybe they had a sense there had to be something more. That there had to be some ultimate divine being beyond the very human-like gods they worshiped. It appears the Athenians are seeking whatever god can provide some sense of meaning in their lives, some sense of fulfillment. Even if it is an “unknown god.”

Just as Paul tries to provide meaning to what he sees in Athens, so too are we called to be modern-day Pauls. To attempt to make meaning of what we witness around us. We are ostensibly a Christian society. But in many areas, our society is Christian in name only. What we witness in mainstream culture and media reflects little of our Christian heritage and values. In this landscape, we can take a cue from Paul. To effectively minister in our own culture, we must

first learn to listen to the culture, hearing within it aspects of the ways people are seeking and yearning for the One who will give their lives meaning. Paul did not condemn or criticize. Rather, he observed, listened, and then conveyed the Gospel message in a way that would be understood within that cultural context.

Even in our own culture, there are “unknown gods” that are being worshiped. Wealth, consumerism, political ideology, appearance and body image, a myriad of isms, individual freedom at the expense of the common good. All are forms of idolatry. Whatever meets or seeks to meet our deepest desires for fulfillment and wholeness. As Paul addresses the issue of the unknown gods of first century Athenian society, maybe he also has something to say that can be a response to the unknown gods of 21st century American society.

Alone in Athens, Paul seeks to be faithful to preaching the Gospel in a strange and complex situation. He is a brilliant and dedicated follower of Christ who works long and hard to communicate the Gospel in all kinds of different circumstances, in ways that would not overtly offend the locals. After all, his ultimate goal was to introduce them to the one true God, not drive them away.

Christianity has often been willing to use other religious traditions to make the Gospel intelligible to non-Christian cultures. From the beginning, the church has had a history of going into areas of pagan worship and introducing the one true God to the peoples. Often it was through explaining that the one true God is more powerful—that their gods, redefined as “saints,” were not really gods, but rather servants of the true God. This was often done through appropriating pagan religious rituals and giving them a Christian interpretation to win over the pagans.

But here in Athens, Paul has a unique opportunity. The Athenians, in their acknowledgment of the possible existence of an unknown god, have provided him with an opening. Rather than criticizing their religious beliefs, rather than dismantling the religion of the Athenians, Paul affirms their quest for the ultimate divine being. When Paul sees the inscription to the unknown god, he declares without hesitation “I know this God. Let me tell you about him.” Paul begins by telling the Athenians about the God he worships. How he is a living God, not a god made of silver or gold or stone, not made by human hands; not a god relegated to living in a shrine made by human hands. How he is a life-giving God, who created the world and everything in it; how he gives to all mortals life and breath. How he is a relational God who looks on us as his children—a God who, while holding us accountable, is also loving and merciful. How he is the ultimate Divine being, who is Lord of heaven and earth.

And then Paul delivers the zinger. He sums up the vastness, the omnipotence, the omnipresence of this God—the ultimate nature and meaning of this God—by saying “For ‘in him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17.28a). In so doing, Paul evokes the memory of Epimenides, a Greek philosopher-poet who lived in the sixth or seventh century BC, who wrote these same words in praise of Zeus, chief of the Greek gods. This is a clever move on Paul’s part. An attempt to convince, to win over, these philosophers by invoking one of their own in words intended to describe the most powerful of gods.

In saying “in him we live and move and have our being” Paul is pointing to the expansiveness, to the inclusive nature, of God. The Athenians, because of their many gods, would have been divided in their allegiances. They would have had a compartmentalized faith, with different gods responsible for various aspects of life, for various aspects of their well-being. But Paul assures them that this “unknown god” is the single, true God who is responsible for the entirety of their well-being. And not just their well-being but also their very being. That this is a God who is loving and merciful, far beyond what they know and experience of their own gods.

In his discussion, Paul never mentions Jesus by name, although he does allude to him. In so doing, Paul seems to be drawing from the nature of Christ expressed in our Gospel lesson, where Jesus assures his disciples that he and the Father are one, and the nature of that loving relationship is not only between Jesus and the Father, but also between Jesus and us, and through that, between the Father and us. The love Jesus wants his hearers to embrace is not an abstract philosophical concept—as the Athenians would have likely seen it—but is the lived reality revealed in the life, relationships, and actions of Jesus Christ. The One who is God with us, who was one who looks and talks like them and lives among them. One who fed the hungry, touched lepers, healed the sick, and spoke and acted with a sense of caring for each person he encountered. This is a God of love, exemplified in Jesus’ life of service and compassion.

Such is the nature of the “unknown god” the Athenians seek to worship—a god unlike any of their other gods. This seeking is a critical element of the Acts story. It is why the Athenians built an altar to an “unknown god”—because of their searching for something more, something greater than they are, something beyond themselves, something that can provide authentic relationship. This is the very nature of humankind—to seek for something more, something beyond ourselves, something to give meaning to it all.

Perhaps this is the purpose for which God made humanity. As Paul tells the Athenians: “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him” (Acts 17.27a). I love the way Paul characterizes our relationship with the Divine: that we search for God, perhaps even grope for him. That sense of searching in the dark, knowing something is there, but not quite sure where it is, yet seeking with a sense of urgency. With that sense of profound faith that we will indeed find, or be found by, God.

In *Confessions*, his seminal work on his own spiritual journey of seeking to know God, Augustine of Hippo writes of God, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (*Confessions*, Ch. 1). In this one statement, Augustine captures the essence of what our religious life is all about. Of what our very existence is about. God created us to be with him. Part of our being, our purpose, is to search for him. Our life of faith is one of God desiring relationship with us and of us desiring and seeking to be in relationship with God. We desire and seek to know the full depth of what it means that “in him we live and move and have our being.” The God who loves us, who forgives us, who strengthens and enlivens us with his own being. Our hearts are restless, seeking that truth. But we are not commanded by God to seek him out. He merely invites. And waits.

Isn’t that why we are all here? Drawn by the immense love of the One who invites us into relationship. Drawn by the need to seek and perhaps grope for him, in hopes of finding him. In

hopes of being found by him. But mostly, drawn because our hearts long to rest in a god who is not unknown; in the God in whom we live and move and have our very being.