

Sixth Sunday of Easter - May 14, 2023

Acts 17:22–34

“New Life means a God who is not far”

1. The story which the children helped retell from the book of Acts is about how we human beings long to know the divine
 - a. Paul was in Athens, a cosmopolitan Greek city known for its people’s knowledge of philosophy, and literature
 - b. And there were also the many temples to the many deities
 - c. Perhaps you’ve been to Athens. I haven’t yet. But I can picture the many buildings dedicated to the many gods they had (and it’s a bunch, if you’ve ever read about Greek mythology)
 - d. When Paul notices one particular altar, he starts a conversation with the crowd
 - e. The altar is dedicated to the Unknown God.
 - f. That makes sense, I suppose. They said: “We have so many gods we want to be sure we don’t miss out one of the deities out there, so we’ll have this altar just for them.”
 - g. Think of it as the tomb of the unknown soldier, honoring all soldiers by honoring one whose death was never connected to his or her identity.
 - h. Paul tells them what they worship as “unknown” is actually the God Paul preached, and who points to Jesus as God’s son and our savior.
 - i. And Paul makes the point that “indeed God is not far from any one of us. For ‘In God we live and move and have our being’ ” he says, quoting a Greek poet.
 - j. Professor Jeremy Williams of TCU writes: “This God who is knowable yet ultimately unknown is close to everyone.” Because this God made every family of humans and ultimately that connects us all to God AND to one another.
 - k. Williams continues: “Paul demonstrates that all humans are a part of God’s progeny, which provides a glimpse for us into what divinity looks like. Divinity does not look like gold, silver, or stone. It looks like people.”
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-1722-31-6>
2. Divinity looks like people.
 - a. Last week Rev. Adam Russell Taylor taught us that part of living as a cohesive and loving community is connected to knowing that we are each created in the image of God.
 - b. That, of course, is an old lesson which we would benefit from getting off the bookshelf and dusting it off and using it again.
 - c. We don’t then worship people, but the belief that we are all made equal and in God’s image, connects us with God and with one another.
 - d. I find comfort and wisdom in that.

- e. And still, we don't know.
 - f. Still we are faced with the challenge of how to stop wars, end poverty, dismantle racism
 - g. Still we don't know why there is suffering
 - h. Still we don't know where God is in our time of need.
 - i. Or maybe we do know. Maybe the answer is in the riddle itself.
 - j. We find that God is present with us in the community, in the face of the stranger, and the advice of the wise mother, and the embrace of a life-long friend.
 - k. As Paul mentioned, ours is a God who is not far away, and perhaps that means that as long as we find ourselves in community, we'll have the opportunity to feel that presence
 - l. Perhaps the presence is in our common efforts to have a community which truly lives out love and justice, where its members truly try to learn from each and lean on each other. There we will find God's presence near.
3. And still, we don't know. We can't know. Not really. Not fully. Not tangibly.
- a. It's funny: we have telescopes which look farther out than ever before, and microscopes that look closer than ever before, and we wished that clarity of vision could show us God or God's guidance in times of uncertainty.
 - b. There is a prayer by Thomas Merton which has brought me comfort in moments of not knowing.
 - c. Thomas Merton was a monk and lived in the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, near Bardstown, Kentucky, until he died in 1968. (Incidentally, Cal Brand's spiritual director is a monk in precisely that monastery)
 - d. Merton composed a prayer which if you google "Thomas Merton prayer not knowing" you'll find it.
 - e. It's a prayer about not knowing (not so much not knowing God, but not knowing what God then wants from us). His prayer clings to the possibility of a God who is near enough to hear these words, to feel these feelings, to anguish over this uncertainty:
 - f. Here is Merton's prayer:
My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,

though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though

I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me,

and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

4. Beloved, God is not far away. God is as close to us as our companions on this journey of life. And though we may not know with certainty all we wished we did, we trust God is the one leading our journey.

Sources: <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/merton-prayer>