

“REACHING FOR GOD”
John 14:15-21; Acts 17:22-31
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“The more things change, the more they stay the same.” This is a famous statement that is meant to note that although time passes and all around us technology and culture seem to change virtually everything we see and do, the reality of the human condition remains largely the same. This is the perfect quote to describe the reality of the Lukan writings concerning Paul’s speech to the Athenian scholars and philosophers at the Areopagus. In this passage, Paul was standing in the place where the great Athenian scholars stood to debate the realities of life and politics in the Athenian state. Although in this missionary moment Paul very much acted the part of the Athenian scholar, he brought a new message to the Areopagus that day. On that day Paul was there to preach the realities of God’s presence to Athens. His speech begins very much as if he is a modern day speaker, warming up the audience. At first he notes how deeply religious he has found them to be: in other words, don’t see this as an attack or as a message from the outside, I merely come to join you in your religiosity. And so he begins by complementing them from the outside. Politics 101 says to connect with your audience, and he has done just that. And now that they are at ease, he pokes and prods very quickly by describing the state of their religious endeavors. After a general comment or two, he stops and focuses on an altar that he sees which contains the inscription, “To an unknown God.” This inscription allows him to step inside the Athenian world and share the proclamation of the glories of God to a people in search of something, to a people in search of a God they have yet to know. It is interesting to look back to the cradle of civilization to a time and governmental structure from which we have borrowed so much and note that what Paul witnessed was a group of people groping around for a God to hold onto. They were searching and built shrine after shrine to God in an attempt to find answers. And so we join Paul in looking down our noses just a little bit at them as we imagine their ornate shrines to God and their simple quest. It is so wonderful to be 21st Century people, no longer subjected to such behavior. But let’s not get too smug; let’s not forget that famous statement. How much have things really changed? How much different is their quest? Are their questions really that much removed from our own?

And so we visit the altars of our culture. Drive up the roadway toward Portland; stop at the outlet mall. Visit the unknown God of J Crew, Gap, or Levi’s. Stop into our sports stadiums: the church of Ichiro, Kobe, Brett Favre, or even the expanding grounds of Reser Stadium. Stop into our grocery markets and look at the products we buy in search of something, in search of some way of looking like that beautiful person on the label. Hand me that can of Pringles: I can worship here! Pick up any travel brochure and look at the beautiful beaches that can take you away to a picturesque paradise where life is idyllic. I want to go to that Garden of Eden where sin, sunburn, and my cell phone are surely no going to reach me. Forget all that; let’s take a trip together and visit all the monuments of the world: the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, the Sphinx, and even the canals of Venice. Hop on a plane; all those altars and 24 hour slot machines, too, are available in Vegas. What more could we want? We are truly not very far removed from those days of searching in Athens as our culture supplies us with an endless array of places and things to worship: an unknown God.

But let's not get too down on our culture; we can't blame our flailing and reaching for God solely on someone else. An awful lot of that flailing comes straight from us. One of my favorite moments in seminary came when we entered my New Testament class to find virtually every known artistic device sitting on tables and easels: pens, paints, fabrics, markers, pencils, chalks, papers. . . every color you could imagine was sitting there in front of us. Every texture was at our disposal. We all found our way to the desks and sat among the tools. This was New Testament class; was an art school using the space? Why hadn't they cleaned up? Maybe we would wiggle out of class early because of this mess. Maybe we missed an e-mail that class was canceled!? But then our professor entered and told us to sit down, and she proceeded to walk around the class showing us all of the supplies. And then she told us what we were to do. Our assignment was to create artwork that portrayed something about what we had learned so far in our semester of New Testament. For instance, who is God? Who is Jesus? What is the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to worship? What is a Christian? And then she left the room and said we had an hour and a half. After she left, most of us sat there for about two minutes in a bewildered state. What was going on? Slowly we began to make our way to the supplies. What would we create? What does she want? Showing more than a little bit of intellectual ego, I wondered, "How am I supposed to do an academic exercise with crayons, paint, and all this other stuff?"

I sat before paper and supplies for a long time, and I slowly began to draw something. Then I crumpled it up; I tried again. Same result. Move on to paint. A quick watercolor of a water skier wasn't getting me any closer to my assignment, but so far that was all I had. I opened my Bible and began scanning passages; surely something would come to mind. What did she want! Why was she doing this to me? I remember an endless supply of exasperated sighs from around the room as 80 students tried to figure out just what to do with such a small amount of guidance. The clock was ticking away; finally with about eight minutes left, I quickly put together a finger-painted view of about eight children playing together. God was in them. That was my answer. It was a cop-out, but it was my story, and I was sticking to it.

When she came back she surveyed our work, asked a few of us to explain our medium of choice and then as paint and glue dried, she called us all back together and simply said, "You are learning so that you can be ministers. You have to be able to describe your faith; without words, without being concrete about your beliefs and your faith, without being able to draw or paint or create a picture, you are simply reading books and writing answers. A New Testament faith isn't about regurgitating biblical theory. Watch your e-mail. I'll see you on Thursday."

And so we left. And we realized that we were immersed in our studies; but for many of us, it had yet to become much more than an academic pursuit. When she finally e-mailed us about three hours later, our assignment was to write about how we understood our faith and how we would tell the story of our faith, according to what we had learned so far.

The future of ministry: lost in an exercise stuck at the altar to an unknown God. The future of ministry groping around with our supplies, largely unable to do anything but create stick figures.

And so I ask each of you: How would you have responded? Would the art supplies, colors, and

textures leave you overwhelmed too? Do you have the words to describe your faith? Who is the God that you worship? Paul's words to the Athenians ring true today; we are still reaching for God. To whom are we reaching?

Paul's words burn with the heat of missionary conviction. Paul went to Athens seeking converts, and that conversion message cannot be obliterated from this text. However, for 21st Century Christians this text, and our Gospel reading, offers promises that are made to sustain us in our flailing about. Paul's missionary words contain a reminder of our spiritual inheritance: We are God's offspring, a reality meant to bring comfort and hope and give us a foundation more solid than the elements of the earth to ground our faith upon. This reality is meant to keep us from flailing about and missing the realities of God.

But we are human; and no matter how many times we hear it, and no matter how clearly we might see our God for an instant or two, I suspect we all have questions or doubts that make God obscure an awful lot of the time. And that is why the gospel's promises of the Holy Spirit are so important. In John's gospel, the Holy Spirit is promised to the disciples during the farewell address of Jesus. He knows that soon he will no longer be present with them; but he wants to assure them they will not be alone. We are the beloved offspring. "You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." As we enjoy our spiritual inheritance, we are not left alone to do so. I can only imagine that the disciples must have been confused by these words. In the midst of telling them that soon he will not be with them, Jesus is offering them something else, something that the world cannot receive. I'm sure they whispered more than a few comments about this one—an advocate that the world cannot see or know. Thanks Jesus, that's a good one.

And so we, too, are left 2000 years later without Jesus, without the one who fulfilled the ancient prophecies. We, too, are left groping around for how we are to live and whom we should follow. "If you love me, fulfill my commandments." And so we try, we fail, and we try again. Love your neighbor as yourself; love yourself even when you doubt your worth; love yourself even through your failures; and then love your neighbor, also. Love your Jewish neighbor, your conservative Christian neighbor, your Democrat or Republican neighbor, your gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgendered neighbor. Love others, for God has loved you.

Proclaim and work for justice, share your faith, feed the poor, share that which God has given to us. Follow the commandments of Jesus: try, fail, and try again. Reach for God, flail around for God, find God when you can find nothing else, for we will not be abandoned.

And so we come to Christ's table still reaching for God, still groping around in the darkness of our own making, hoping against hope that we will find a way to name and connect with God. And so we feast—in the darkness or in the light—forever we feast at this table. From the last days of Jesus's life, to the hillside in Athens, to Corvallis in 2005, we all come to feast—reaching for the God that we often cannot sufficiently name. And so we reach, and eat, and hope to be moved by the Holy Spirit—the God who is clearly there, the God we long for, the known and unknown God. It really is the same, isn't it? Still reaching. . .for God. Amen.