

Looking for God in All the Wrong Places

Acts 17:21-28a

St. Marks UMC, Charleston, WV 6th Sunday of Easter
(May 21) 2017

²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,^[a] ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,²⁸ for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

We have been talking about our Christian Witness during this season of Easter. The apostle Paul demonstrated a form of witnessing in today's scripture.

He did NOT berate the people, nor even correct them. Rather he met them where they were, and talked about their NEED.

Areopagus – not 80 degrees like Janet's Jerusalem. And it is very windy, a stone hill perhaps as tall as to the top of the dome of this church. It took my breath away when I climbed it, and was glad I took a walking stick.

What was their need?

What did the "unknown god" represent?

Looking for something that was missing in their lives.

St. Augustine, who after the first third of his life looking for satisfaction of that need, looking for a scratch that resolved his itch, in a lot of wrong places, finally found Jesus. And then later, he remarked: ***We are restless, unless we find our rest in You, O God.***

Our Call to worship this morning said that we are chips off the old block ... in other words, made in the image of God.

Demonstration with the wooden puzzle piece. It just won't be satisfied until it is fitted into the place where it belongs.

That's what the Athenians were looking for. That's what Paul tapped into.

Where do we find it?

How do we show it to others who are looking?

A story is told of how Satan wished to destroy the people's belief in God. He summoned his four wise counselors and said to them, "Tell me where I can hide God so that the people will never find him."

The first wise man said, "Hide their God behind the furthest star. There they will not find him." "Not so," said the second wise man. "One day they will learn to fly and then they will find their God, Hide God, I say, on the floor of the sea and they will never find him."

“Not so,” said the third wise man. “One day the people will learn to swim and they will swim to the bottom of the ocean and then they will find their God. Instead, hide God within a set of religious rules. Then they will constantly beat one another up over how to interpret the rules and thus never see God, Himself.

The fourth wise man said, “That might work. But what if one day they might just happen to quit arguing and comparing – albeit it unlikely – and find God. Here is the best plan: hide their God within the people. No one will ever find him there.”

And so Satan did precisely this. He hid God deep down inside of the people themselves, certain that they would never look within. What Satan failed to realize was that this last voice was indeed the Voice of God.

Different cultures share some version of that story ... Indian (the eastern nation next to Pakistan) Christian, Lakota First Nation, etc.

We got a glimmer of that same story, in the Road to Emmaus Gospel account two weeks ago:

They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32)

And the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ... (Ephesians 3:20)

And perhaps the best authority of all for this story told throughout history – Jesus Himself:

“The Kingdom of God is WITHIN you.” (Luke 17:21)
[in 27 different translations]

But people go looking in lots of places for that place, that thing which will cure our restlessness. Until finally at last they find it where the story tells – within.

I asked Olaf and Katherine Funfstuck why they decided to come to Saint Marks, and Katherine why she decided to lay claim to the blessings of baptism, and why they wanted to join Saint Marks.

They told me it was because in this place they could feel not only the Spirit of God moving powerfully, but also it is where they felt at home.

This embassy of the Kingdom of God – this church – is indeed a special place. Many of my colleagues are envious of my appointment. But the real difference that the Funfstucks found is ***how God worked WITHIN them when they are in this place.***

God is love.

Would you repeat that please: **GOD IS LOVE.**

How have you felt the Love of God in your life during this past week?

Go ahead. Think about that.

And then share it with your neighbor. Tell the person sitting beside you where you have felt the Love of God this week. (And it's OK to be honest ... you may NOT have felt it this week. Some weeks are like that.)

[PAUSE]

Now, one more question: where/how have you showed God that you loved Him this past week. You don't have to share that with your neighbor. But I do want you to think about it.

[PAUSE]

We have been talking about WITNESSING. But at the heart of witnessing is EXPERIENCING GOD'S LOVE and we cannot RECEIVE GOD'S LOVE without GIVING THAT SAME LOVE BACK TO GOD.

We are restless until we find our rest in Thee, O God.

- Calm us.
- Slow us.
- Allow us to be.
- So that we may know.
- And then that we may share.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.