

Sixth Sunday of Easter/May 17, 2020

Call to Worship

- L: Come to worship, people of God,
with praises on your lips.
- P: We glorify the One who
holds our hands when we slip.
- L: Come into the presence of the One
who calls us into this sacred space.
- P: Where the doors to grace
are thrown open so all may enter.
- L: Come and hear the stories
of the One who loves you.
- P: We will tell of the joy and of the love,
of the peace and of the hope which is ours.

Prayer of the Day

When it doesn't seem
to do any good, Creator God,
we dare to be your people,
to love those the world
would have us reject;
to be just in the face
of every reason to mistreat;
to be unafraid
of whatever awaits us.

When all the odds seem
stacked against, Jesus our Savior,
we dare to live as
your sisters and brothers,
serving others
with our hands and hearts;
sharing in the burdens
of our world;
refusing to leave justice
orphaned with no hope.

When the wind seems to be
knocked out of us
by the blows of life, Eternal Companion,
we dare to breathe
joy upon those
caught in the net of hopelessness;
peace into all
the broken places around us;
wonder for all those
who have lost sight of you.

In you, we dare to live and breathe and be,
God in Community, Holy in One. Amen.

Acts 17:22-31

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ ²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

“The Faith of Others”

Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *Holy Envy*, says that “Judaism has always recognized that God made *more than one* covenant with humankind. God’s *exclusive* covenant with Jews exists inside God’s *inclusive* covenant with *all people*.”¹

This is why Judaism actively *discourages* converts.

You see, according to Jewish tradition, God made a covenant with Noah that included *all people* before making a covenant with Abraham that included *one particular people*. Between the two covenants God has everyone covered, and the one does not replace the other.²

In the words of Jonathan Sacks, who served for twenty-two years as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (in the UK):

“The God of Israel is *larger* than the specific practices of Israel. Traces of (God’s) presence can be found throughout the world. We do not have to share a creed or code to be partners in the covenant of (humankind). The prophets of Israel wrestle with (the) idea ... that *moral and spiritual dignity* extend far beyond the boundaries of any one civilization. They belong to the other, the outsider, the stranger, the one who does not fit our system, race, or creed.”³

I’d like to suggest that *this* is the context we need to have in mind when hearing our text for today from Acts 17: *Paul preaching to the people of Athens*.

You see, in his speech at the Areopagus Paul proclaims:

God is the creator of everything.

God is not limited by (does not live in) human-made things.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, Harper One, 2019, p. 89

² *Ibid.*, p. 89

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 90

God does not need anything from human beings.

Humans all come from one ancestor (or one blood) and are all God's offspring.

God is the matrix of existence—in whom “we live and move and have our being.” These things together present a very majestic idea of God as powerful and all-pervasive.

We humans do not know this God, said Paul, but we search and grope for God, who is like “*an unknown god*” to us. This does not stop God from knowing us, and being in relationship with us.

Ask yourself: *How can God be both majestic and intimate?* I had a professor who grew up as the child of Baptist missionaries in India. His favorite image of God was the image of a *kneeling elephant*.

There is a story of a group of *blind men* who encountered an elephant for the first time and tried to describe it. One touched its giant leg and said, “*It's like a tree.*” Another felt its writhing trunk and said, “*No, no. It's like a giant python.*” A third encountered the tail and said, “*Are you crazy? It's like a coarse rope!*”

I'd like to suggest that *God is like the elephant to us*, in that none of us have the capacity to see the fullness of God, or conceive of the total majesty of God.

Yet this tremendous *unknowable* God *knows us* and *chooses to be in relationship with us*. It's as though the elephant is kneeling down near us, so as to be less distant and overwhelming.

With this in mind, *note* that Paul addressed the Athenians “*and all the foreigners living there*” with an inclusive “*we.*” Since we are all children of God, all created by God, he said, then we should understand that we can't create God. A child does not give birth to his or her parent, and creatures do not create their own creator.

However creatures *do create*. And children speak about their parents and strive to be like them. So while Paul says that God is not “*like*” an image created by the

“*art and imagination of mortals*” (17:29), he nevertheless uses *human poetry* to speak about *what God is like*. **Art** can begin to describe God, and open our hearts or minds toward an experience of God.

So, we can embrace *human creativity* as a gift from God which can also help us to *draw closer to God* and understand *the nature of God* a bit better.⁴

This is why I so appreciate Brian McLaren’s concept of “*spiritual friendship*.” I think that Paul practiced spiritual friendship in the way he engaged the people of Athens. He encountered the people there with *attentiveness* and *respect* and *learned* from them as well as sharing his own insights. He “*looked carefully*” at the *objects* of their worship, and then affirmed the people as “*religious in every way*.” He acknowledged and honored them.

This is important to understand because Paul proclaimed the *good news* with a spirit of *respect* and not *domination*. He had a tone of *invitation* and not insistence, *relatedness* and not rejection. These attitudes make up a *posture of hospitality* which foster *kinship* rather than estrangement, *transformation* rather than entrenchment. In *spiritual friendship* we are all *changed* as we endeavor to draw closer to God.

Ask yourself:

What does it mean to be a person of faith in a world of many faiths?
How does loving Jesus equip me to love those who do not love him the way I do?
*What do religious strangers reveal to me about God?*⁵

However you define the problematic present-day stranger—the religious stranger, the cultural stranger, the transgendered stranger, the homeless stranger—scripture’s wildly impractical solution is to *love the stranger as the self*. We are to offer the stranger food and clothing, to guarantee the stranger justice, to treat the stranger like one of our own citizens, to welcome the stranger as Christ in disguise. *This* is God’s express will in both testaments in the Bible.⁶

⁴ Nanette Sawyer, *A Majestic and Intimate God*, The Christian Century, April 20, 2008

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, pp. 102, 103

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111

In the Christian New Testament, Jesus himself (like Paul) admits that *he does not know everything there is to know about God*. So maybe we should have a little *humility*, too. But most of us prefer those (verses) *that grant us special privilege*. For (many), the most potent one is John 14:6, in which Jesus says, “*No one comes to the Father except through me.*” Here is bedrock assurance that Christians have access to God. But why is this verse more important than one that comes two chapters earlier in John’s Gospel? “*Whoever believes in me believes **not** in me but in (God) who sent me,*” Jesus says in John 12:44. Maybe my hearing is off, but those two verses sound different to me. So why do so many Christians know the former saying but not the latter one? Could it be that our favorite verses are the ones that make us feel most right?⁷

“*I have **other sheep** that do not belong to this fold.*” That is something else Jesus says in John’s gospel.

Friends, as Paul implies at Athens, no one *owns God*. This is a great mystery, but it does nothing to obscure the *great commandment*. In every circumstance, regardless of the outcome, the main thing Jesus has asked (us) to do is *to love God and neighbor* as religiously as (we) love ourselves. The minute (we) have that handled, (we) can ask for our next assignment. For now, (our) hands are full!⁸

Prayers of the People and the Lord’s Prayer

Mothering God,
 Life-giver,
 Protector,
 Nurturer,
 Guide,
 the uncertainty of these times
 exhaust us to the point of
 despair,
 and we find ourselves
 asking the cliff-hanger questions
 that never get answered:
 When?

⁷ Ibid., p. 119

⁸ Ibid., p. 120

How long?
Where?

We long to hear the calm reassurance
that you are present with us ...
that whatever the future holds,
you will be holding us in your constant care ...
that the eternal promises are still true
and always will be,
no matter what.

For the graduate who seeks to celebrate
a hard-won accomplishment,
For the couple who has looked forward
to making their vows,
For the grieving who ache for the healing community
as they bury their dead,
For the parent who longs
to hug the child,
we pray for your compassion and your comfort.

O speak to reassure us,
to hasten or control;
O speak and make us listen,
the hymn-writer pens,
thou guardian of our souls.

The Lord's Prayer

Charge and Benediction

