

“Not Far From Each Of Us”

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,

“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

For 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.

The God who made the world and everything in it, the One who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God —though indeed God is not far from each one of us.

For ‘In him God live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said, For we too are God’s offspring.’

Since 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.

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,

now God commands all people everywhere to repent,

because God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed,

and of this God has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Not Far From Each Of Us

Acts 17:22-31

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I.

I know that this might sound strange to you, but sometimes I get *really* excited about preaching. Normally, the relentless return of the Sunday sermon is no cause for celebration. Every once in a while, though, I get the convergence of a soaring heart due to the beautiful spring weather, a fresh outlook on life as the result of some heart-tugging act of kindness, and the inspiration of a knock-your-socks-off scripture passage. Today is such a day of convergence. I mean look at this beauty of a passage from the book of Acts! This text is a Ph.D. thesis in the making.

II.

Here we find Paul standing on the Ar-e-op-agus, the rocky height known as “Mars Hill” which was the meeting place of the Council of Justice located in the Greek city of Athens, the cultural and intellectual epicenter of the known world, and here he takes an incredible assortment of ideas ranging from Cosmology (origin of Universe): God who made the world and everything in it; to Phenomenology (fundamental appearances): *in God we live and move and have our being*; to Ontology (the realness of existence): *God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things*; and finally, Epistemology (how we learn/know: *all nations would search for God and perhaps grope for God & find God*. Paul then weaves these together with the mystical nitty-gritty of the spiritual life: *though indeed, God is not far from each one of us*. But, as you will agree, today we do not want, or do we have time for, a doctoral dissertation. So, how do we shake this passage down to just a few very sharp brass tacks which we can take home to our lives?

III.

I’m going to try something a little different this morning. I assume this will make some degree of sense to all of you right away. But my prayer is that it will make much more sense to each of you as you attune yourself to the voices we hear everyday, but to which we don’t really listen. Imagine if you will, the voice Paul used that day in Athens: straightforward, insightful, convicted,

urgent, fighting an uphill battle, employing a fair amount of ironic humor as he struggled to be heard above the din of the crowd and the loud cultural cacophony which shouted each day at the Athenians. This voice, which would become the voice of the early church, would last for only a few generations. In time, as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the voice of the church took on a new timbre: THE VOICE OF THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH!

IV.

FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS THE VOICE OF THE CHURCH BOOMED ACROSS THE CONTINENTS, SETTING DOCTRINE, FORMALIZING WORSHIP, CLAIMING LAND, WEALTH & POWER IN THE NAME OF CHRIST, WAGING ECCLESIASTICAL AND POLITICAL WAR, AND RULING THE SPIRITUAL DOMINIONS OF THE WESTERN WORLD.

With the advent of the reformation in the 16th century, what was once the lone voice of the church shouting from Rome, eventually became a chorus of competing beliefs and convictions. Our own Reformed tradition soon had its own part in the religiously discordant choir: BY SCRIPTURE ALONE! THE CHURCH REFORMED...ALWAYS REFORMING. And this plurality of church voices spread from Europe to the new world. Eventually the choir came to include: the Puritans, the Lutherans, the Baptists, the Episcopalians, the Methodists and of course Presbyterians (or Prez-ba-terians in the south lands).

V.

Over the next two centuries though, this uniquely American version of the voice of the church formed itself into a droning multi-denominational monotone, rigid in stance, more moralistic than spiritual, with an assumed importance, that often went unexamined; which first helped to establish, and, then, was later bound to the perceived manifest destiny of a new nation.

But this voice of the church wasn't all bad, as it helped to sustain our nation through the dark years of civil war, and the fear and threat born of two world wars. By the 1950's the voice of the church in America, took on a patently up-beat tone echoing the climate of the culture.

VI.

Back in those days, as some here will remember, the pews were always full, the church schools were bursting at the seams, and membership in a church mattered! These were bright days filled with the promise of new technology to make our lives easier; highways and a booming economy gave birth to the suburbs, and with this an upsurge in church growth, unlike any in our history. This was the ecclesiastical golden age, when, as we remember it, our whole nation heard the voice of the church.

Then the voice of the church, once so strong and loud, began to falter. The “Yeah Man!” and “Groovy” of the sixties gave way, in the seventies, to a legitimate criticism of the voice of the church which had admittedly grown far too institutional. During the eighties and nineties, the voice of the church, though still audible, was deemed irrelevant and ineffectual, and either because of, or in response to this, the church rarely said anything of importance.

VII.

Which brings us to the voice of the church at the start of the new millennia. If we listen carefully to what the voice of the church is saying these days we hear that most everything is phrased in the form of an emphatic *question*? As if we care, but really don't know what we believe? Or if we do know what we believe? we really don't want to come off as sounding too sure of ourselves? and running the risk of offending somebody? I mean, really, in a postmodern world? how can we hope to be sure of *anything*? The notion of faith as a foundation for one's life? has now become only an ongoing process of asking questions and never really expecting any answers? We're never really sure of anything anymore? you know what I mean? It's almost as if we have, like, lost the sense of who our God actually is? and what our God really requires from us? And if you think about it? doesn't this sound a lot like those Athenians who were worshiping an unknown God?

VIII.

If you don't know your God, as Creator, and Redeemer, and Sustainer, your worship, your spiritual life, and even your day-to-day existence, will never move beyond that of a question. And while it is true that the voice of the church should always be *questioning*, what we say should never be heard *as a question*; as if we do not have the capacity to know, or the fortitude to believe, or the courage to hope, or the will to proclaim.

So this morning, good people, I would challenge you, to be the voice of the church and speak to this world and to our own selves, with straightforwardness, insight, conviction, urgency, employing a fair amount of irony and humor to fight the uphill battle, as we struggle to be heard above the din of the crowd, and the loud cultural cacophony which shouts at us each day. Because, as Paul reminds us, and as we believe without question, we have something important to say: God is not far from each of us. Amen.