

God is not Far

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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Sixth Sunday of Easter– Year A

Acts 17:22-31



It became clear to us as we talked with one another in the “All Things Possible Capital Campaign” that God was calling us out – outside these walls, outside our comfort zones, out into the street, out into the world. When we established the goals of the campaign, again and again we were drawn to the idea that the church exists not for itself only but for the sake of the world, that we were called to respond to God’s grace in worship, study, and service; that we came into this space to breathe in, to train our eyes to see, in order that we might go out into the world to see God at work, to join in God’s work in Christ, to live and love in joy and peace with all – *all* – our neighbors.

It seemed during the campaign that every significant Sunday the text assigned for the day spoke to whatever it was we were experiencing. Today is no different. Today we are encountered by a text that shows Paul not holed up somewhere away from the bustle of the city, but fully engaged in the life of the world around him, and doing so in a way that I believe can show us how to be engaged in mission and outreach – two of the key emphases of our campaign – with authenticity and power.

I conducted an experiment back in the winter. I spent a whole day wearing my collar. Normally, I only wear it when I am doing pastoral duties out and about. I never wear it in restaurants or stores and will take it off if I’m walking in the neighborhood or in town. But I had talked with one of my DMin friends and we both were wondering what kinds of opportunities would present themselves if we wore it all day. So, I did.

I wore it to lunch, I wore it picking up my dry cleaning, I wore it having a drink with a friend, and I wore it in all the usual places as well. In addition to my being a much more courteous driver, I noticed a few other things as well.

At Whole Foods, a woman with three kids called me “Father,” and when I said I wasn’t Catholic but Presbyterian, she said she had grown up Catholic but walked away from it. “I found it to be too judgmental. But every Sunday, we take the kids on a walk. I think you can connect with God in nature.”

I listened and thought about saying something more, but her kids were fidgety, so I said “Blessings,” and she thanked me and walked on.

At the place where I was having that drink with a friend, the waiter asked me which denomination I was, and when I said Presbyterian he asked if the Presbyterians mind saying prayers for Baptists. I said we prayed for their souls all the time. He laughed and then told me about his sister who was having surgery the next day in Omaha. He couldn't be there, and it was hard, so he was getting as many people to pray as possible and he felt he hit the mother-lode when he saw me. “I mean, your prayers go straight to the top, right?”

I listened and thought about saying something more, but he needed to get on with his work. As we were leaving, I said, “Blessings to you,” and he looked at me as if shocked by those words, and said, “That's so sweet,” and went back to work.

I walked away from the experiment disappointed in myself. I didn't invite either of them to church. I didn't offer to pray with them. I just blurted out “blessings” and moved on.

When I read the text for today, I thought again about that day with the collar. Paul is moving about Athens, the seat of Greek philosophical thought, the city that gave the world Plato and laid the foundation for much of the modern Western world. As a Jewish man, he was basically wearing a collar – he was immediately recognizable ethnically and religiously as one of those pesky monotheists that gave the pagans of Greece and Rome such headaches. He could have taken the more familiar posture that the Athenians were no doubt accustomed to, of disdain for all the statues and idols, a god for every possible thing. Instead, Paul does something remarkable. He connects with the Athenians.

Many read this story and find in Paul's speech a kind of sarcasm, as though he is not being sincere. But nothing in the story points to anything other than authenticity. “I see how extremely religious you are in every way,” says Paul. And as he walks about and observes the objects of their faith, he spots an image to an unknown god.

It is, if you think about it, a remarkable statue. It would be as if we recited as part of the creed... “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the life everlasting, *and* that there are a lot of things we don't know. Amen.”

Paul proclaims this unknown god as the one God who created heaven and earth, and who, most importantly, cannot be held in shrines made by human hands. God is

unknown in that way, in that no human mind can conceive this God, no ideology can contain this God, no doctrine can cover all there is to know of this God.

God made us to search for God, to grope for God, and perhaps, Paul says, to find God. All these statues – the reason you build them is an effort to find God, which God made you to do. Every piece of art, every expression of music, every book, every ideology or political effort, everything we do is in one way or another a groping after God, like a lost child pining for a parent.

And that is when Paul names the beating heart at the center of this text. We grope after God, but in fact God is not far from each one of us. And then he quotes the Greek poet Eratus, who wrote in his book “Phenomena,” in 270 B.C. that “we live and move and have our being in God,” and that “We are God’s offspring.”

John McClure writes, “Much of the art and creative productivity in this world, at its deepest level, is expressive of ... God’s ever-creative Spirit present within all creative process. Rather than shunning this creative potential, Paul recognizes it all around him and celebrates it as something that could open us to the God who wants to be known in Jesus Christ.”

Paul is a Jew. He is a Christ-follower. He looks around, and like Calvin would say many centuries later, recognizes that the human heart is a factory for idols. We long for God, we grope around in the dark for God. And that longing will cause us to set just about anything up on a pedestal and worship it as God. Paul asks of them, and us, to recognize this for what it is, and to recognize that the God who longs to be known has been made known in Jesus Christ, the Resurrected One, in whom we live and move and have our being, and to whom we truly belong as his offspring, his beloved children.

Do you remember the text that lies at the heart of our capital campaign, the rich man who comes to Jesus wanting to know what he must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus looks at him, and loves him. Jesus says, ultimately, that he lacks one thing. He should tear down the idol of possessions, of wealth, give it all away, and come, follow him. The man goes away sad, possessed by his possessions, and after Jesus says how hard it will be for a rich person to enter the kingdom, harder than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, the disciples proclaim it impossible. “With humans, it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.”

The world outside these doors, a world we are very much a part of, is longing for God, for connection, for the possibility that love of the kind we see in Jesus Christ is not a pipe dream, not some sort of fantasy. A lot of people walk around out there – looking

for God on a Sunday hike, looking up to heaven for God when life turns tragic, and looking for those people who will love them, no matter who they are – love them enough to take them seriously, love them enough to bless them, to name for them the God who is as near as their next breath, to say to them, “God is not far...God is not far...you are God’s offspring...you are God’s beloved child” and to welcome them to a bountiful table not confined to this building or any other, but set in our hearts by the Living One.

The text ends on a note of judgment. It is a judgment that we already feel in many ways, each time we discover the inadequacy of some idol or other we’ve put too much trust in. Each time that happens, it is a chance to repent, to turn and go another direction, deeper into the life God calls us to live. This is the summons and the blessing Paul issues to the people of his day, and the one we too hear and can proclaim.

So here we stand, at the mid-point of the campaign, and so much has been done. Newness abounds, in brick and mortar, in our hearts, and in our connections to this community, and the global community. So, what now?

Athens is just outside these doors, groping after God, longing for a blessing. We are all wearing collars. And God is not far. Amen.