

Our Hearts Are Restless Until...

Text: Acts 17:27; John 1:9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

“Our hearts are restless until . . .” so goes the title of the message and it comes, of course, from the oft quoted statement of St. Augustine, whose claim was “*Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.*” I do believe that. The longer I am in the ministry, the more I am convinced of that. I remember coming into the ministry a rather scared and fearful and defensive person, wondering whether or not this enterprise into which I was entering had a future. Being very fearful for the faith, worrying about what seemed to be, at that time, the unraveling of the world. I was not a child of the 60s – the 50s, for goodness sake. Such was my narrow, cribbed understanding of things.

Now, looking back over more than three decades of ministry, I know that Augustine was right because God has created the human person with a hole in the heart, with an empty space in the soul, which nothing can satisfy save resting in the grace of God. We may in restlessness struggle to stuff it full of all sorts of things—some destructive, some delightful, but finally all of us really need to know, want to know, long to know that God is, and that God is for us, and that grace is ours. Yes, Augustine was right. I am sure of that. “*Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.*”

It seems as though we have come to a period in the human experience when maybe there is again a more general recognition of that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, incarcerated for his attempt on the life of Hitler in the dark days of national socialism in the depths of the Second World War, wrote *Letters and Papers From Prison*, which is a marvelous spiritual testament. He spoke about “man come of age,” and he had the sense that God was being edged out of the world. We all speak out of our own context, and his context was so vivid in his experience, of course. He was reflecting the high point in human culture, in the German civilization of the day, the high point in so many respects—highly educated, the arts, culture, technology, scientific achievement. It was as though in Bonhoeffer’s perception the human perception and human society had come to the point where we could do without the hypothesis of God. The human person in charge, shaping and determining his or her own world, having the reins of one’s own

destiny in one's hands. I am sure as Bonhoeffer traverses the celestial courts in the company of the Church Triumphant he must shake his head at this near end of the 20th century.

For, less than half a century later, there are all kinds of evidence of belief on the part of the human person. Some of it is rather bizarre. But it is not at all true that the human person has come through stage after stage after stage to where finally superstition or belief or faith are no longer necessary or present. We are as believing for good or ill, as superstitious, as gullible for good or ill, as I guess any previous generation. There's a positive side to that, and that is a new openness, a new recognition that, as Bonhoeffer was living at the end of a couple hundred years of constant development and achievement through the exercise of human reason, human rationale, he recognized the faithlessness of that—the assertion of human rationality and human autonomy, and he saw it almost as the end of the process. We can look back over the last decades and see that making the human mind the measure of all things has brought us up empty. We have come to see that it's not *seeing is believing* but that, in that invisible world of spirit, it is rather *believing is seeing* that is the perceptive mode by which we gain insight and understanding.

In this season of Epiphany we celebrate the fact that that which is not available at the disposal of our human investigation has been given to us as gift in the gracious God who unveils that heart of love at the center of things deep down. This is what Paul discovered. I find myself returning to this experience of Paul in Athens again and again. It fascinates me. He had such *hutzpah*. Here he was, this Jew, who was convinced that God spoken supremely in Jesus who was the Messiah. He goes to the very font of western culture and civilization, to the height of academic achievement, to Athens itself, and has the audacity when asked about his beliefs to say, "I saw an image. You are very religious, and I saw an image with an inscription to an unknown God. This unknown God whom you worship, I proclaim to you." Is that boldness? Is that daring? Is that the passion of faith and conviction? I guess it is.

Some of you were with me in Athens this past September as I stood at Mars Hills. I even have a photograph to prove it. We talked together about the experience of Paul in Athens. It disturbs me a little bit that Paul was disturbed when he came there having done the city tour, because he was at the center of the highest achievement of human culture and civilization. He was provoked. At least as Luke tells us the story, he was provoked because of the pantheon of gods and goddesses. I wanted to say, "Paul, don't you have some appreciation for the marvel that is this cultural achievement? Don't you have some sense of the glory that is Greece?"

But then I remember that Paul was catching that culture and civilization as its fame was fading. He was seeing only the dying embers of what once had been the brilliant light, the most brilliant light of human achievement. Cultures have their

dawn and their zenith and their fading away. So perhaps I can forgive Paul for not standing in awe on Mars Hill in the presence of the Parthenon, because what he saw in the marketplace in that time, 500 years after the Golden Age of Greece – what he saw there were the academic intellectual discussions that had become mere play, mere games. They weren't serious any more. They lacked passion and conviction. They were just philosophical discussions, the way to spend an idle hour. They enjoyed this kind of thing. Luke tells us that they did nothing but discuss things and ideas all day long. Well, that can be a wonderful pursuit, but it can also be an empty pursuit, a superficial pursuit, a pursuit that has not the pulsing passion of life and conviction about it. That's what Paul ran into. When he came to Athens he was at a hinge point in history. Five hundred years after its glory, it had degenerated into mind games.

And he proclaimed Jesus, and he said, "The God whom you grope after—you're very religious." Paul didn't say that was of no account. He didn't denigrate it. He acknowledged the quest. He honored the yearning. And then he said, "Let me tell you about the one who is behind all of those representations that you have set out in your pantheon of gods and goddesses. Let me proclaim to you the one who is the font of life, the creator who gives us life and breath, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. This one I declare to you, this one who has become unveiled to us in Jesus, this man appointed by God to reveal, to redeem, to judge and to save."

Paul proclaimed Jesus as the light that gives insight into the heart of God, which is what John, of course, testified to in the marvelous prologue to his gospel—this one who is light and life coming from God who is the source of life and light—this one becoming flesh and dwelling among us so that we could behold him. "No one," John says, "has ever seen God." But this one, as a father's only son, this one, has made God known. That's what Paul believed. He had his own Epiphany experience. Paul never turned his back on his own tradition either, nor did he disparage Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and the Law. But he had come deeply rooted in all that, then to be uprooted suddenly in the brilliance of the light of the risen one who encountered him and called him to take this light of the knowledge of the Eternal God to the nations, this God whose heart was laid bare in the flesh of Jesus.

So at that critical hinge point in history, Paul was able to let go, as it were, and not to cling to all of what had absolutely shaped him and formed him and about which he had conviction and passion. He was able to let go in order to respond to the heavenly vision. He said, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, believing in the Christ, reigning present in the Spirit." He came to Athens, mighty Athens itself, in a time of its own decline to say, "Here's light and here is life. Here's the Eternal God whom you seek, the God whom you grope after; this insatiable hunger of the human heart, this inevitable yearning and groping satisfied through the God unveiled in Jesus Christ." That's the story of Epiphany

and that's the God in whom we believe. And our hearts are restless until we find our rest in that God.

I used to wonder whether the enterprise into which I was entering as a young preacher had any future. With white-knuckled intensity, with great defensiveness and fear, overcompensating I suppose with bombast, I tried to hard sell the Gospel, not knowing that there's a hole in the human heart. If only we can find access, because the human heart is hungry for God, and human beings are insatiably religious. We are learning again in our day that is not seen as believing, but that faith itself is a manner of perception, and in believing we see. But, even then, I can't stop there, for the moment I believe and I see, I'll begin to think again. And, when I begin to think again, I'll find that my heart cannot long rest where my mind cannot follow.

I was going to bed last night at midnight. I set the alarm and suddenly I got the note pad out and scratched something down. Nancy said, "Bingo." I said, "Bingo, that's it." *The heart cannot long rest where the mind cannot follow.* If that resting place in God, which might happen in an overwhelming moment, cannot be tested by our experiences in full light of all that we know and understand, its foundation will not last. Therefore, for our day, just as Paul did for his day, as Martin Luther did for his day, at every hinge point in human history, what we need to do today, – also at the end of an age, perhaps at the twilight of western culture and civilization: twilight, not because of some inevitable historical determinism, but because conviction and passion dissipate, confusion reigns, and easy tolerance and lack of conviction may be at the end of this our western cultural experience – what we need to do is find a way to say, "Jesus Christ, today—for tomorrow."

I heard a very eloquent speaker recently who represents the very finest of evangelicalism, who gave a very accurate and articulate description of our contemporary situation—with its confusion, and its chaos, and with its crises. His call was to go back and to capture the clarity and conviction of the 16th century. I wanted to stand up and say, "No. You can never go back." That which ignited passion and instilled conviction because it was the confession and profession of the moment in its context can never be simply dusted off and polished up and set in use again.

What we need to do is to believe so deeply today in the grace of God that we'll be able to let go, let go of all of that that has shaped us and formed us, not afraid but trusting in the Spirit who beckons us into the future, the Spirit whom Jesus said "would come and lead you into all truth." Even John in that day recognized that there were things that they could not handle, but that would be revealed subsequently by the Spirit. Why should we believe that process ever stopped? Just as Paul had to let go in order to proclaim something grander and brighter than ever he knew, so we today have to be able to let go and to rest in that grace.

Our hearts are restless and we rest in God, but resting there with freedom and joy to find the way to say to our neighbors, to those with whom we work, our family, our children and grandchildren, “Come, walk with us in the Light, which is the Life, which has come to us through the Eternal God who created all things and whose heart was laid bare in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Come walk with us, for you are hungry, and there’s food and drink in this One.” Said, maybe in a new way, in new shapes and forms— nonetheless, the same Light, the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, our Lord.