

I Peter 3: 13-22
Acts 17: 22-31
John 14: 15-21

To An Unknown God
May 14, 2017 – Confirmation Sunday
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This past year (in case you haven't been listening) I taught a confirmation class. I try to prepare lessons that deal with the Bible, with language about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, with Church History, with Mission and Ethics and Worship. This is so that the young people learn – but not only learn. It is so that they can begin to discern their place in our community, and how they belong to this community. Every year is a little different – I come us with some new material, AND, guess what? I get different students to speak with.

But sometimes I think that I should really be studying the art of persuasion. I get the feeling that parents would like me to persuade the young people to be baptized or be confirmed, or to become moral human beings. I don't think persuasion is my strong suit. I went looking for some books to help me learn, and there are a lot. There's The Art of Persuasion: How to Influence People and Get What You Want and there's Influence: The Art of Persuasion and there's 6 Universal Methods That Will Help You Master the Art of Persuasion AND there's 4 Tips for Mastering the Art of Persuasion. I can't decide which of the last 2 would be better: 6 methods or 4 tips☺

Back in the first century, the Apostle Paul did a lot of teaching of new Christians, and he did a lot of persuading, so I am feeling some kinship with him. He took a lot of trips to towns around the Mediterranean. He wanted to share his new understanding of God's purpose in human life. He had a pattern, an approach that was pretty consistent. First, he would go to the local synagogue. He was Jewish, and they shared a history, a scriptural language, a code of ethics. So with that foundation to his work of persuasion, he hoped to present something new.

Well, this was not always successful: another reason I feeling a connection with Paul. On this second missionary trip, he stopped in Thessalonica. The synagogue forced him out of the city. He went on to Berea. After initial success, he was driven out of there too. Then he goes on to Athens, the center of the intellectual world, a cosmopolitan place. Paul argues in the synagogue. No success. Then he moves out to the marketplace and argues with the philosophers. They call him a babbler. They bring him to the Areopagus, the hill of Mars, where the town officials would meet. (Maybe like a selectboard meeting in Norwich?) This was a wonderful opportunity to address the most important people of the city. How would Paul use this moment, what would be his point of contact to draw in the audience and persuade them of his truth?

Sometimes I think Paul was a bit excitable, and he let his strong opinions get the best of him. He starts out with sarcasm – uh oh. I want to say, as a teacher, that this is not always a good method of persuasion – it can backfire. He says, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Is this a compliment? The word "religious" here means "in dread of demons." In his world, and I suspect in ours, everyone is religious, whether they know it or not. Everyone worships – or dreads - a god or gods. The question is, which? Atheism was not a possibility in Athens. We might wonder whether true atheism is possible anywhere.

Paul had already noticed that the city was “full of idols,” which distressed him deeply. But he reins himself in and finds the point of contact, a method of persuasion: the altar to the unknown god. What they had set up as a symbol of all that was powerful and unknowable, Paul names and describes and brings close. There *is* a Creator God who is intimately connected to all that lives and breathes. Paul quotes from a poet in their own Greek tradition when he says, “In him we live and move and have our being...for we are his offspring.” Now he really seems to be speaking their language.

Speaking to idolaters, trying to get them to change, to evolve from partial understanding to something more: this was the task of those ancient missionaries. The Athenians did not only have idols as we usually think of them. Of course there were many gold and silver and stone and wood images and statues that offended the Jewish sensibilities of Paul. People also fashioned images of God from their own imaginations and worshipped them. In this great intellectual metropolis, a university town, if you will, people also constructed intellectual idols. They developed schools of thought, philosophies, which they believed explained everything. They made idols out of ideologies.

Paul’s description of the Unknown God is bigger than any of those deities worshipped in that city. A God of this size and scope cannot be contained in a single image or shrine or system. Wonderful as images or ideas may be, they are too partial to be worshipped. We cannot mold the divine to our specifications. Instead, we are continually challenged by this God to re-evaluate what we think is important and holy. The immensity of this God reveals the insignificance and limitations of our idols.

Today, we still need to hear the message to the Athenians. In the book God Laughs & Plays, David James Duncan writes, “The greater a person’s confidence in their definition of God, the more sure I feel that their worship of “Him” has become the worship of their own definition.” We all have room to grow out of our preconceptions and definitions, whether we are in a confirmation class or we have been sitting in pews for 80 years.

Paul makes the point that this God is very near. He speaks a Creator, who created us with the urge to search, and perhaps grope for and find this unknown God. A few centuries later, St. Augustine wrote of this, saying “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” And then more centuries on, Blaise Pascal writes, “There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of every person which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator.” Seeking, groping, finding: the evolving nature of our faith. For Christians, there is One sent to show us that God is very near: one to help us on this learning journey.

This seems to be the part of the message that the Athenians have the hardest time with. They can follow the discussion of idols and creators. They can understand his quotes from their own poets. But when it comes to the particular, a man who was sent, who died, who rose again, who is somehow still present, then they have had enough. He’s lost the persuasive thread and they can’t listen any more. I feel that they can’t take this intimacy between God and humanity: this idea that the creator God would come this close, and the idea that this closeness could overcome death. That was a little **too** close. The advantage, after all, of idols and ideologies is that they provide a safe barrier between us and the overwhelming power, love and concern of God.

How is that power and love and concern expressed? If we turn to the Gospel reading we find Jesus sitting with his disciples on his last evening with them and speaking about the future. There is a tender and sad tone to his words, but also a sense of urgency: he is about to leave them. He does not leave them with an ideology. He speaks of their love for him. He gives them the promise of the Holy Spirit: a promise of that closeness, that intimacy with God. The word for Spirit here could mean advocate, counselor, comforter. It means “one called alongside to help.” An ally. Jesus elaborates: it is also a Spirit of Truth and a teacher. Everything that is said here about this Spirit has also been said elsewhere in the Gospel about Jesus: this spirit can function in all his roles. Jesus says, “I will not leave you orphaned.” The Holy Spirit will be his presence with his friends after he is gone. The closeness which they had found with him and with God is not broken by his death. This is the ever-present God, the God who is not far off.

As a spirit of truth, it is at odds with the idols and ideologies of this world, this culture, as Jesus says, “...whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows him.” Through this Spirit, we see and know God. We search and grope and find. We don’t need that altar to the unknown God, because God is so near, fitting into Pascal’s “God-shaped hole in our hearts.” At the same time, we recognize the flaws in our own institutions, in the history of the Christian Church, especially as it has accommodated to the mainstream culture, and aspire to do better.

Paul was not all that successful in Athens. At best the response was lukewarm. So you can see how a pastor’s heart might go out to him. Many preachers don’t feel all that successful these days either, in our contemporary Athens-like environment. Doug Moore and I used to joke about Scottish parishioners who would shake the ministers hand at the end of the service and invariably say, “Nice message,” and then quickly move on to the subject of the weather. I think we all share something with the people of first century Athens. Something gets in the way of our hearing and roots us in one stage of our spiritual development. They and we prefer our divinity well-packaged – maybe in gold or silver, maybe in a sanctuary, maybe in some neat construct – in a container of our own making. We even prefer our humanity safely packaged into preconceptions and ethnic categories and political systems of our own making...which we like to attribute to God.

Life is about growth and change, and a lot of our learning takes place when we are vulnerable, when we make mistakes. Maybe this is the “groping” that Paul speaks of: a bit of stumbling around in the dark while we try to find something solid. Perhaps a point of contact - something persuasive, something with which we are familiar – can lead us to a new place, where God and humanity are differently defined.

What would we have to let go of to hear the good news taught by Paul, to feel the comfort and closeness described by Jesus? What would we have to accept? We might have to release our attachment to certain gold and silver images, to release God from human shrines and boxes, and maybe even to give up certain systems of thought that helped us explain the world. And as we did, we might realize that those idols and ideologies were not only barriers to God, but were obstacles in our love for each other. Acceptance: we might have to accept that life belongs to God, and that it was given to us as a gift. We might have to accept the command to love in place of the structures and laws that kept everything so well contained. We might have to accept an infusion of Spirit from the man who spoke so kindly to his friends at the supper table. This is not an easy road. As G.K. Chesterton said more than a century ago, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” So let’s see if we can try in a new way, shall we?

Today, as we mark the end of another Confirmation Class year, I speak both to our young people - to Gunnar and Eamon and Loulou and Emma and Sonja and Sasha and all of their generation – and I speak to you who were baptized or confirmed decades ago. Unless we are willing to find a point of contact with those around us – and risk ourselves in order to enter into dialogue with them, we are not growing in faith. If we stay focused on conversation inside our own walls, using persuasive language that only we understand, we will become frozen and obsolete. The church continues to evolve if we see ourselves searching, with others who speak differently, for that God who is close and familiar, but always a step ahead. We might even have to journey from synagogue to marketplace to Areopagus – or whatever the modern equivalents would be. We can call on the Spirit of Truth to be our guide: not the angry insular truth of a few, but the warm and moving, comforting and enlivening, encouraging and engaging truth of our teacher, Jesus Christ.

We are not left orphaned: God is being revealed in the lives of mortals as we live and move and have our being. Let us celebrate this mystery and grow in love. Let's us explore the possibilities of spirit-filled community. As T.S Eliot wrote:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

Amen.