

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 25, 2014
John 14:15-21/Acts 17:22-31
“The unknown God”

The Hebrew Testament, psalms like the 23rd psalm, teach that the creator God is with us.

The Gospels remind us that God walked with us in the incarnate form of Jesus. Since Easter, we have listened to the disciples’ response of awe, and sometimes disbelief, to the presence of the resurrected Christ. God is with us in incarnate and resurrected form.

On this 6th Sunday of Easter, we anticipate the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit. ‘God is with us’ expands to ‘the indwelling life with God through Christ.’ We hear the development of the Trinitarian formula that we use in blessing: God, the Father who is above us, the Son who is with us, and the Holy Spirit who is within us. ‘Who is within us’: The indwelling life is much more difficult to gather our thoughts around, more complex and mystical. In today’s Gospel text, Jesus begins to explain what and how that indwelling will be.

The reading from John is a continuation of last week’s Gospel passage: we paused in our lectionary reading, but Jesus kept on talking. Jesus chose the Passover supper to prepare the disciples for his betrayal by Judas, his imminent arrest and death on the cross. I doubt the supper was the calm peaceful gathering typically pictured in Renaissance artwork. The Last Supper was more likely marked by confusion, anxiety and fear.

Jesus begins by reassuring the disciples. When Jesus leaves them, they will not be lost. Through him, they know God. Not only do they know God, they know the *way* to God. Nor will the disciples be ‘orphaned’— that is, separated from their heavenly Father. Jesus promises that God will send an Advocate to be with the disciples in his stead. The disciples will have the guidance of the Advocate to help them continue the work begun in the ministry of Jesus. The Advocate will be the spirit of truth and the enabling presence of God.

Last Sunday, Deacon Eric reminded us that many Christians have read John’s Gospel, Jesus as *the Way*, as if Christians have the exclusive knowledge of and claim to God’s love. Gandhi, Moses, Sara, Abraham, all knew God, just not in the unique way Jesus did. In John 12:32, Jesus says, “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*” That’s all people, all places. Inclusive, not exclusive.

Reminding ourselves of the context of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse brings focus to Jesus’ commandment to love one another as he loves us, and the invitation to go forward in the knowledge of Christ’s presence and love. Jesus says, *I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you.*

God in us, and we in Him. The indwelling life with God through Christ. If God is with us, and in us, and we in him, then God is – everywhere.

In the words of 1 Peter, Jesus' followers must always be ready to explain their faith, *with gentleness and reverence*, to give 'an account of the hope that is in you.' **Always**, not just sometimes. We hear the fear, stress, agony of early Christians. You may be maligned or abused for your faith in Christ, Peter says, but do not be intimidated. "*It is better to suffer for doing good...than to suffer for doing evil.*"

Speaking to the newly baptized in Rome, Peter gives them their mission charge as new Christians. Paul speaks to the philosophers of Athens, then the intellectual capital of the western world. Paul chooses the language of the Greek philosophers. There are no scriptural quotes, no images from Judaism in his speech at the Areopagus, although the monotheism is biblically grounded. Presenting the Christian faith to the Gentile cultures, to the surrounding Greco-roman society, was not an easy task.

Presenting the Christian faith to strangers is not an easy task today, either. You've heard people say, *I am spiritual but not religious*. Many people only know about Christianity through what they have read or heard in the media, and they reject it.

You may find yourself eager to persuade, to minister to their searching. But, you hesitate because you know that at some point in the telling of your faith, you will give witness to Christ's lordship and resurrection. The resurrection is both the heart of our Christian faith, and a stumbling block to the contemporary mind. Surprising in a way, because our culture today seems willing to believe extraordinary things about the paranormal.

I have a favorite challenge to adults in Christian faith formation which I have talked about before – that is, to design an 'elevator speech' explaining the essence of their faith to a stranger. A modern elevator may travel one floor in about 30 seconds – assume a five story building, and you have a little over two minutes to give your speech. It's fairly unlikely you would choose to proclaim the kerygma – Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again – or the 3rd century Nicene Creed!

It makes a difference who is in the elevator with you. Just as it made a difference that Jesus' Farewell Discourse was addressed to his disciples just before his crucifixion, the words of Paul in Athens to the philosophers, or the words of Peter to the newly baptized in Rome. When explaining their faith, each adopted a rhetorical and cultural strategy.

Imagine, in the elevator with you, there is a young mother with a wriggling, crying baby – you might say something about Jesus' love for children, or how Jesus described God as a loving parent; perhaps you would say we are all children of God and feel a lot like a crying baby when things go wrong. You might even quote a psalm on that point.

Or, imagine there is a man in the elevator with you. He is unkempt, there's an open sore on his face, and he stares at the floor as he slumps against the wall. Your elevator faith speech to him would likely touch on God's healing power, Jesus' special concern for the poor, and you might offer that God loves him, just as he is.

In the reading from Acts, the apostle Paul has crossed through what we call Turkey. He has been forcibly driven out by the people of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Now Paul is in Athens, where there is no sign of a Christian community of any kind.

The Areopagus was the site of the advisory council to the Athenian Kings, on a low hillside across from the Acropolis. The Areopagus council functioned as a high Court of Appeal for civil and criminal cases, and the site featured altars for sacrificing to the many Greek/Roman Gods. The scripture verses immediately preceding today's reading tell us that Paul has been brought to the Areopagus to account for his faith. Not, apparently, on trial, but nevertheless summoned. 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us...' Acts 17:19-20.

Using arguments drawn from Greek philosophy, Paul attacks their religious practice of worship of idols and proclaims his faith in one God. Just as in our (imaginary) elevator speeches we looked for an opening in the people to whom we spoke, so Paul observes and sees that among all of the idols represented there is an altar to an unknown God. I can't help but think of banquets or other events when I have been asked to give the 'thank you's' – always afraid I might miss someone. At the Areopagus, an altar to an unknown God, just in case.

Here is Paul's elevator speech – I paraphrase. He begins, *I see you are very religious. I will tell you about this unknown God. He is not of human creation, he made all and is Lord of all. Since he made all, including humanity, he has no needs. He moves in history. We seek God because God made us to seek him. We are God's children. God is not contained in objects of metal or stone, God is not an object. God's Spirit is in all things, for 'in him we live and move and have our being.'*

God calls all people to repent, God calls us through a man he has appointed. Because this man – Jesus – has risen from the dead, we know that he is God's chosen one.

Did Paul succeed in explaining his faith? Did he make any converts with that speech? At the very least, those present saw the altar to the unknown God with new eyes, and *wondered*. Could it be true? Seeking, as the unknown God made us to seek Him.

In our elevator speeches, we seldom reach that climactic point about the resurrection because we fear loss of credibility. We are intimidated. Surely, we can say in contemporary language what Peter told the newly baptized in Rome, "He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."

A few weeks ago, I encountered a man in the hospital setting who invited me to sit with him for a while. After some social chit chat, he said, *I really have you here under false pretense, I am not religious, in fact I am an atheist, or at least agnostic. Jesus was a great man, but I cannot go along with resurrection and ascension.* I asked him to tell me how he arrived at his conclusion.

The man spoke non-stop for almost half an hour. He started with his view of creation and went from there. He was educated in Scripture and science, and brought forward many well-articulated arguments. I responded here and there with (an inarticulate) *hmmn*, and *ummm*. When he finished, he thanked me, and said he hadn't talked with anybody religious in donkey's years.

So, I said, (taking a chance), where are you today in your faith? He looked at me blankly for several silent moments, and then a smile lit his face. *'Why, he said, I believe it's true, the resurrection and Jesus.'*

Now what do you do with an experience like that? Clearly, I was not bringing Christ to him. Christ was there already. There were so many things which pointed him away from Christ, facts of science and dissonance between his reading of Scripture and history. Yet, as he spoke he discovered in himself those things he already knew which pointed *to* Christ.

Letting people make their own way to Christ is, I think, vital to our witness and evangelism. Creedal affirmations have their place in worship. Sharing testimonies, bearing witness in daily living, elevator speeches that help us to see what we might have overlooked that points to Christ.

Looking for and finding the unknown God are at the heart of Christian mission.

Let us celebrate those things which open us to God within us.

Amen

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
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