

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for May 16, 2020 ~ Easter 6A

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

The book of Acts is distinguished by the amount of space (appx. 20%) it devotes to speeches. Today's text consists of one of those, Paul's sermon at Athens. Here we have the complete sermon. Paul is on mission in the Aegean area. He is preaching to an audience in the Areopagus, the place where learned Greek orators addressed learned audiences populated with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, representatives of Greco Roman popular philosophy.

When he arrived, he was alone in the greatest university town of the world, an intellectual Mecca. Athens was famed for the many religious cults to which it had extended hospitality. It was a city of many gods. It was said that there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all of Greece and that there it was easier to meet a god than a human being. The days of political and economic power had past in Athens and now men would gather to talk about the latest idea. Paul had no trouble finding an audience when he arrived. The philosophers found Paul

Paul found the citizens of Athens to be a very religious people when he went there. They had an inherent capacity for religion. In his sermon, he suggests three things you and I need to do with that capacity for religion within us.

We need to recognize our capacity for religion and not pretend that it doesn't exist. We are born with a deep-seated desire to worship something. We call that phenomenon "natural religion." St. Paul recognized it among those Athenians to whom he preached that day. Having noted their preoccupation with the science of philosophical inquiry and having also noted the many altars to various and sundry gods, including several to "the unknown god", Paul begins his remarks by saying somewhat ironically, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every respect you are very religious." They had a deep-seated desire to worship something. And so do we.

Yet, we also have a way of thinking we don't need to worship; as if worship is optional. It is as if we can get rid of it by denying it or ignoring it. Sigmund Freud wrote in his Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis: "Darwin has banished God from nature, Marx has banished him from history, and I have banished him from man's inner life."

I take exception to Dr. Freud. We can't get rid of our native capacity for worship any more than we can get rid of God by ignoring or resisting God. Why is that? It has to do with the way God has designed us from the beginning. The One from whose love human beings came forth continues to love us extravagantly and lavishly and so completely that God will not let us alone.

This persistent God is portrayed in the book of the prophet Isaiah as having strong maternal qualities: "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save" (Isa.46:3-4). And, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. . ." (Isa 49:15-16a).

We need to be always seeking opportunities for growth in our capacity for worship. A little girl checked out book on penguins. She returned it the very next day. The librarian, who knew her, asked if she had finished

reading the book so quickly. The little girl responded, "No. I didn't want to know that much about penguins." We, too, sometimes want to limit what we know.

We know that every normal person is endowed with certain amount of intellectual curiosity. She reaches out with the fingers of her mind to grasp and investigate the truth of the world around us. Yet no one would be content to leave her so. She is educated. Education assures her that she is already an intelligent human being and then begins to train and direct those natural curiosities until they develop into the mature thinking adult. The child who has the ingenuity to make strange sounds with vocal cords and strange marks with a crayon grows into the man or woman who can speak a magnificent language and write a great drama.

So also is each person equipped with the impulse to pray and worship. Religion assures us that we are praying creatures. It then begins to nurture and correlate those natural impulses, eliminating that which is harmful, restraining that which is distracting and diverting, avoiding a waste of spiritual energy, and in this way increasing and intensifying the tremendous power of those basic human drives. Thus, the person who stands awestruck before the sky and the stars becomes the one who worships the God in whom we live and move and have our being and whose offspring he is.

We need to stop wasting our native capacity for worship on unworthy gods we encounter in everyday life. And there are so many of them. "Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your god" (Martin Luther). What does your heart cling to and rely upon? Are those things truly worthy of the deepest devotion that is in you? Our English word "worship" is derived from another word, "worth." We "worthship" God because God is worthy to be praised. Do you ascribe to God a greater worth than anything else in your life? Are you wasting your native capacity for worship on unworthy gods?

In his "Letters and Papers from Prison", Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: "I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre....I therefore want to start from the premise that God should not be smuggled into some last secret place, but that God...must be in the middle of things."

God is not only "out there" or "at the edges" or "in the gaps," but God is in the middle of things. Paul says, "for indeed God is not far from us." And, "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."

Science, art, etc. want to know the truth, the best there is. So the naturally religious. If we are going to worship any god at all, we want to worship the real One. We meet God at every corner, but we sometimes fail to recognize God and we get lost. There are places God's promised to meet us, we call them the means of grace. Our search with God does not end with knowing "about" God. It must continue to grow into a deeper personal knowing, for what God has desired since the dawn of time is companionship with us.

William Cullen Bryant - bleak Autumn day. Saw a waterfowl winging its way southward.

He who from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must trod alone
will lead my steps aright.

It is not an unknown God, but the One Creator God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has so wonderfully revealed himself to us. God has given us this marvelous capacity for religion to connect all the parts of our life and experience and to undergird us. God has called us by our first names. We know who it is who has made us, and sustains us, and whom, we God's children, worship and adore.