

Acts 17 22-31

So Paul is in Greece at the Areopagus...god of war and stone...Ares Rock or as we call it Mars Hill. And that's where many important matters were discussed and debated. Think of Athens like a college town today...intellectual pursuits...centers of higher learning...philosophers and extensive religious pursuits... the pinnacle of modern man.

So Paul isn't going to win any debates here is he? Instead, he meets them where they are and enters into their context and understanding of the gods, to paint for them a larger picture of the Divine.

This is important...Culture and Context... he entered into their understanding in order to plant the seeds of Christ.

Notice today many of our own religious rituals are just repackaged versions of previous understandings of God...our Altar and Sacristy are from the ancient Jewish Cult who themselves borrowed it from the Egyptians. Then the Romans repackaged it within their own temple system, and I am still wearing an alb...a roman garment to enact the same ritual today.

All of our religious Holidays include Pagan rituals and ideas...Easter revolves around the Spring fertility cults and Christmas around the Winter Solstice and the themes of darkness and light. Jesus wasn't born in December.

Even today...Sunday... is not the Sabbath from the scriptures that would be Saturday...but rather Sunday equates to the day that the Romans celebrated the Sun god...that was their day of rest. Whether we know it consciously or not... our spirits long to be at one and connected with one another! We keep intertwining our views and understanding of that which is larger than us.

But you know that you'll never get a seed to grow if it doesn't find fertile soil. If you come in "guns a blazing" with all your superior knowledge and self-righteousness about your views of the world and spirituality you will never find open hearts and minds...just entrenched walls and defenses.

To seed something new, you must meet someone in the context of their lives, their knowledge and understanding...not yours. This idea seems to be lost on many of us today...we would rather force our notions, our ideas, and our beliefs onto others...who may not share in our context and learning experiences.

So how is God relevant in the context of today? That's the crux of our church decline, isn't it? Aren't we witnessing a Spiritual reawakening, despite our ancient rituals... rituals that no one seems to care about anymore today.

See the Athenians then intellectually pursued an understanding of their gods. They hungered for something more and Paul noted that they were religious in every way.

They even created an unknown god...just in case they left somebody out...and that was indicative of a much deeper existential restlessness...much like we have today...a spiritual dryness.

They realized that something was missing from their lives. They knew somehow that there was something deeper. A hole that nothing earthly would fill. A craving that intellectual pursuits alone would simply never satisfy...it was unknown!

Despite their intellectual pursuits and rituals they intuited that something was missing...and they left space...they left room for an unknown god. And Paul declares that he actually knows THIS God. The Divine Source of All being...which transcends and encompasses all their notions and ideas!

Paul urged his audience to trust their instincts rather than in their studies...remember Paul was also in the same boat...he was a Pharisee...and a good one...he hunted down the early Christians in pursuit of intellectual laws and their Torah rituals...these Christians were out of bounds and dangerous...heretics to be killed.

We heard last week that Saul/Paul (changing your name doesn't remove you of the crime) was the coat check boy at Stephen's stoning ...what size rock would you like sir? He witnessed and took part in the killing the first martyr for Christ...but then a supernatural experience changed the course of his life. The idea of God moved from his head to his heart...from belief to experience!

Paul's personal experience now shaped his understanding of God, and he urged the Athenians to look to their poets rather than to their philosophers. Paul was trying to move them from the head...found in religious pursuits and practices...to the heart...found in having a relationship and experience with God.

Paul names the unnamable...Paul points them to the ground of all being and uses their context to relate their hunger to Jesus as the Christ...not some intellectual exercise...but a fully realized human experience.

Paul entered into their context but rather than just adding Jesus to their line-up of gods...He introduced this concept of radical oneness...a God which transcended and encompassed all their divided and intellectual religious pursuits represented in their many gods. For in THIS one God we live and move and have our being.

Two thousand years later and what do we Christians pursue today? And what gods do we worship today...Consumer goods, military power, sex, wealth? What's interesting is that the Greeks & Romans worshipped gods who represented these same aspects of ourselves...today we have just eliminated the gods...the middleman... and we worship these idols

for themselves... which really just mirror our own desires and egocentricity.

And so we worship through our intellect...especially today though our technology...and so our intellectual religious pursuits many times take precedent over a life altering encounter with the living God?

And how do we Christians live united under One God...or do we also pursue intellectual exercises and rituals which divide us through the many ways we have been taught to see the world? So how many denominations and versions of the Bible are we up to?

See, we have brought God down to our level... right wing or left wing... this ritual or that one...we argue over the Spirit's procession...we argue when folks should be baptized or not, and when. We pray to statues of saints and crosses...with or without Jesus nailed to it.

In other words, we have brought God down to earth much in the same manner that the Athenians here were pursuing their gods in the name of religion and theology.

In fact, Richard Rohr (a catholic priest) says that many Christians have just repackaged Zeus as god. A Human that looks and acts like us...with a long flowing white beard sitting on a throne somewhere up in the sky...and if you piss him off, he's gonna throw a lightning bolt at you. A fickle god to be feared.

Have we come so far in our own pursuits of God that we also act just like Athenians who only now call ourselves Americans?

We think we are more intelligent...right? We know so much more through modern knowledge and science...we have technology...but have lost something along the way...wisdom!

For all the information we have people still lack wisdom. A knowing born from shared experience. A wisdom that is deeper than what our limited minds and perceptions can ever grasp.

See belief is born of feelings and what we are taught...but true Faith comes only through having an experiential relationship with the Divine...and once that happens everything else falls away.

St. Thomas Aquinas spent his entire life in the intellectual pursuit of God...he wrote the much studied Summa Theologica... in it, by the way, just like Saul he also noted that heretics should not only be excommunicated but that they should also be put to death...another Saint who advocated murder.

He wrote these massive Volumes from 1225 to 1274... that's almost 50 years of studying and writing about God... On the feast of St. Nicholas in 1273, Aquinas was celebrating Mass when he received a revelation that so affected him that he wrote no more...he literally left his entire life's work unfinished.

He told his friend, "The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me." Aquinas died three months later while on his way to an ecumenical council.

See when he and Paul experienced God firsthand then everything changed. Our idea of God must transcend what we think or feel...

So the challenge now is how do we actually do this? How do we know when we are experiencing God? It's hard to get outside yourself?

Now like I said before you will ALWAYS know when you are in God's presence when you experience a deep abiding peace...and when doing God's will, you will experience joy.

At our convocation meeting last week each person spoke about their church...Chris – mentioned Outreach and feeling as one in our church, Linda talked about feeling connected in messy church with the children; and Nan mentioned feelings connected with our community during our monthly luncheons. I noticed when they all spoke that they all shared

one thing in common JOY...others noticed it as well! God was in all those places and with all folks, and they experienced Joy.

Their passions, gifts and talents intersected with the world's needs...and God was right there with them...always! That's how it works.

God is not limited by place, or time, or especially religions or rituals or people groups. God is Love and God's love extends to all!

So what does THAT look like? A passion towards loving inclusiveness regardless of what someone else believes or not. A knowledge that everyone is made in God's image...a God which transcend what we humans think or believe... or who we are?

Remember also that God is always in relationship. The trinity. It's WE and US – WITH God and WITH one another. Interdependent in community as a whole.

And once we intuit this connection then we come to know that Death isn't the end! There's always resurrection and transformation...and that's' where the peace comes from...that connection and knowing!

If we are more concerned about whose beliefs are better...then we spend most of our time and energy on things that are pointless. Beliefs are not what's important ...getting involved in philosophical debates actually doesn't change anything in the end.

Jesus was pretty clear...love God and love others...so go do that and God will always show up! This frees you up to do the things that really matter and count...and in these pursuits you will find peace and joy!

So, is the church relevant today? Sometimes yes...but when church is a Sunday only event... or where you are worried about the sermon...or the music...or parking...then no... that's not Church so much!

See the church is only relevant if the community you serve would miss you if you were gone. If this Church wasn't here would it make any difference? The Church must always ask itself: Are we contributing to

our communities? In other words... are we plugged in...are we connected?!

People are the community...including all that is wrong with it...And if churches are in the business of people in their communities... then churches will always be relevant.

In fact that's the church that most of you folks grew up in, right? And that's why many churches were always built in the city centers... because they were literally at the centers of their communities! All community activities happened in or around the church.

So what now? That's the question..... and the answer... isn't it?

So may the unknown God of ALL, be made known to you in truth and in love...so that you too may come to experience God for yourself... experiencing the joy and peace that comes with having a deep and abiding relationship with the one true God!

Your faithful servant,

carmen