

6 Easter, Yr. A

May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

Last Saturday I was at the evangelism conference put on by the diocese. One of the workshop presenters had some figures: 60% of people in our age group go to church, but by the time you get to the millennial generation only 10% do. As you might imagine the focus of that workshop was how to get our message to that age group. Not so much the message itself, as how to get the message out there. Then yesterday, I attended a Climate Coalition workshop and message was front and center there, too. One of the presenters there was a pediatrician and former CEO of the Gunderson Health Group and he talked both about the message in terms of what an organization is about and then how to get the message both out there and heard. With regard to the evangelism workshop, the idea was that those of us who have the Christian message can no longer expect the younger generation to come to the church. Instead, we have to go where they are, live what we believe and then be available to them when life questions arise. That's perhaps more applicable to other parts of the diocese than it is to Door County. But it does raise the question of what our message IS. And that was also one of the questions in the climate workshop. In the case of the health CEO, he framed the issue by beginning with their mission which was, he said, to promote the health and welfare of their community. Sounds good, right? Sounds like a lot of mission statements. But then he took it further and looked at the patients they were getting and asked why. And in answering THAT question, he discovered that air pollution was a big cause of health problems in the country and that hospitals and drug companies were big contributors to the problem. With that in mind, his group decided to reduce their carbon footprint. They took their mission seriously and did something about it, with astonishing success. One of the interesting things was about messaging. There were members of his board who were primarily worried about the health of the community; but there were other members who were primarily concerned about the bottom line. So the message was that they could do both – reduce their footprint and reduce their costs at the same time. And they did. His message to yesterday's group was that you can do well at the same time that you're doing good. SO – understanding the message and then getting it out there in a way that can be heard and understood and embraced.

That's what Paul was doing in this morning's reading from Acts. He's talking to Greek philosophers. Previously he had mostly preached in Jewish synagogues in the diaspora and so he usually was able to fit the message about Jesus into the context of Jewish history and theology. He and his listeners came from the same background and had similar understandings about religion. But now he's in Athens. The Epicureans and Stoics thought that he was the "herald of strange divinities" and they were interested in something new, something novel, a little grist for the philosophical mill, perhaps. Athens at this time was still the greatest university town and it was a city of many gods. It was said that there were more statues of gods there than in all the rest of Greece put together and that it was easier to meet a god in Athens than to meet a man. So there were altars everywhere – apparently the Greeks weren't taking any chances of missing an important god. They were covering all the bases. Paul is talking to a group of philosophers; what's he going to say to this most sophisticated of audiences?

The text tells us that he says, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Another translation, however, hits on what he was probably really thinking, “Athenians, I see that you are as superstitious as possible.” But that messaging would have been counter-productive, to say the least! So, rather than putting their religious search in terms of superstition and fear – covering all the bases so as not to offend some god that is as yet unknown – he puts it in terms of the universal human search for god. We all search for God “and perhaps grope for him and find him” he says, though he isn’t far from anyone of us, for “in him we live and move and have our being.” And there we hear echoes of what John’s reading says this morning – “you know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you...you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Surely the message here is that we are living in what’s been called a “God-soaked universe.”

So, while Paul’s talking to his Greek audience, let’s pause a minute and reflect on what it means to be religious. The word itself comes from the Latin root which means “bond” or “tie” or “obligation.” The Encyclopedia of Religion quotes various people trying to define it – some emphasized the supernatural, some emphasized power, some ethics. I’d like to suggest that we look at “religion” over a spectrum, going from superstition on one end to agape love and abiding in the heart of God on the other.

We’ve talked a bit about superstition – perhaps that’s the human need for reassurance that we have some kind of control in the face of the perils of the world. There’s a desire for safety, especially if you think, as many of the Greeks undoubtedly did, that the gods were both powerful and capricious and needed to be kept happy. I remember visiting a church in New Mexico. It was a little adobe church and in a back room there was a hole in the floor and a spade with which to dig out some of the dirt to carry it away. The room was filled with testimonials, candles, discarded crutches – and, while we were there, with people digging out some of the dirt to take home. The priest there was adamant that the dirt was NOT miraculous and went so far as to post a notice that when the hole is empty, he just filled it again with dirt from outside, but that notice didn’t seem to deter anyone. So on that end of the spectrum, religion can be seen as a response to a world in which humans feel vulnerable. Religion on this level is about being safe; it’s all about ME.

If you think about early Christendom, even into the middle ages, there was still a lot of superstition, still a lot of focus on my safety, not only my safety here and now, but my safety in the hereafter. The basic insight of the Reformation, though, was that our safety wasn’t at issue and that we didn’t have to earn or buy our way into God’s favor – we were already completely loved. Robert Capon described it, somewhat whimsically, like this:

“The Reformation was a time when men went blind, staggering drunk because they had discovered, in the dusty basement of late medievalism, a whole cellarful of 1500-year old, 200 proof GRACE – of bottle after bottle of pure distillate of Scripture, one sip of which would convince anyone that God saves us single-handedly. The word of the gospel – after all those centuries of trying to lift yourself into heaven by worry about the perfection of your bootstraps – suddenly turned out to be a flat announcement that the saved were home before they started – Grace has to be drunk straight – no water, no ice, and certainly no ginger ale; neither goodness,

nor badness nor the flowers that bloom in the spring of super spirituality could be allowed to enter into the case.” (Quoted in *Ragmuffin Gospel*)

Now THAT’s a message! Assurance that we are safe allows us to take the focus off ourselves. It frees us for a relationship with God. It allows us to lift our heads and look around and to move to a kind of religion that emphasizes relationship with God, spirituality, that’s about falling in love with God. One theologian put it this way:

“God is searching for us, pulling us home from our bewilderment. God speaks through many voices to tell us so. God appears in the moon and the stars, in green pastures and by still waters. God breaks bread with us as Jesus eats and drinks with his friends around a common table. God is the father of the prodigal son, joyfully welcoming us even before we pass through the family gates. God is the Divine Mother, touching us in a phrase of music, a perfect sunset, an empathetic hug from a friend. God finds a thousand ways to tell us we are sought after.” (*Invitation to the Spiritual Journey* by Jack Gorsuch)

This religion has about it a sense of wonder and awe and reverence as well as a sense of gratitude. And that sense allows us to move further from the me-focus to a focus on God and others. Now we can act out of love. At this end of the spectrum, we can “get” that the Holy Spirit within us, that advocate that Jesus talks about, is enabling us and empowering us to understand the truth about God and to then live out that truth in our daily lives.

That movement from ME to the Other is perhaps easier to understand when we think of human love. When we first fall in love, it tends to be “If you love me, you’ll do what I want.” Then it moves a bit to “If you love me and I do what you want, then you’ll do what I want.” But finally, if we hang in there, it becomes, “I love you and that means that I will do whatever is necessary for your well-being.” When we’re at this end of the spectrum, where we’re falling in love with God, we’re like Moses when he asked God to “teach me your ways” so that I can be pleasing to you, so that our relationship can deepen, so that I can come to know and love you more. And what are those ways of God? In Micah, God says that we already know how to do this – we are to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. In both testaments we hear the two great commandments to love God and neighbor. In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that “if you love me, you’ll keep my commandments.” A note here about what I said earlier – we don’t need to earn God’s love; we already have it. So this phrase really means that BECAUSE we love God, we’ll keep those commandments.

And when we live like that it could be called, I think, Kingdom religion. Free people, loving people, confident people, living in a way that lights up the world. We’ll live in a way that our message will be SEEN as well as heard – that message that what matters isn’t buildings or politics or denominations, but kindness and compassion and tolerance and justice and love.

Living that way may cost us something, as Peter reminds us in that section of his letter we heard. But perhaps we’ll be able to pay that cost and pay it joyfully because we understand what life is about in a whole different way. Let me close with a story from South Africa, from the days of apartheid. At one point, a white South African who had worked for rights for the blacks had died and officials had turned away black mourners at the funeral. In response, a black

pastor visited the chief justice, who was white, and asked him to participate in the foot-washing service during Holy Week. He asked the justice to wash the feet of a black woman who had been a servant in the judge's home and had cared for his children. He agreed. When the time came, the judge came forward and washed and dried the woman's feet. But before he rose to return to his place, he took her feet and gently kissed them both, a gesture of the truthfulness and life-giving power of God's love. He paid a price for this action, but thought it well worth it to have been given the opportunity to "preach" God's love by his actions. Our actions may not be that dramatic, but the message we have for the world is the same. We only have to look for opportunities to exhibit it. Amen.