

6 Easter, Yr. A

May 17, 2020

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

This morning's scriptures deal, one way or another, with coming to see, know and love God, which is the ultimate goal of human existence. Looking first at the Acts reading, we come upon Paul who's made a rather unexpected trip to Athens. He's escaping Thessalonica and Berea where his preaching so enraged his listeners that it incited riots. So we see Paul taking a different tack here - rather than riding into town with his theological guns blazing, he's figured out a couple of things - and the main thing is that you need to preach so that you can actually be heard. People who are trying to stone you are not in a receptive state of mind. So when Paul gets to Athens, he takes the time to look around, to see the sights, to tour the city and, most important, to try to understand the people who live there. He sees that they are worshipping idols but he sees something deeper than that - that their deepest desire reflects a longing for truth, for God. And he affirmed that deep desire, that search.

Our society is like theirs in many ways. It's certainly pluralistic, with many voices clamoring for our attention and with many objects or philosophies held up for our worship. Just in the religious realm, that pluralism is reflected in what one Southern California writer pointed

out when she said she could get into a car and find a rabbit's foot in the cup holder, a rosary dangling from the rearview mirror, a bobbleheaded Buddha on the dashboard and a Darwinian fish with feet on the trunk. We too have lots of competing choices.

What was driving the Athenians in their religious pluralism? Perhaps it was their fear of getting it wrong and leaving out some crucial god, who would then take out his or her anger on them. Or maybe it was getting it wrong and missing out on the most important truth about life. Or maybe these philosophers with whom he was talking were just having a good time batting ideas around, trading obtuse hypotheses as a way of exhibiting their brilliance. Or maybe their temptation, like one that is prevalent today, was just to keep looking, because to keep the search going and to keep it going on the intellectual level, meant that it was unnecessary to ever actually make some kind of commitment. You never had to do the hard work of learning a tradition or the even harder work of trying to live out its insights and challenges.

What Paul also saw though, and I think this is equally true today, is a deep hunger for God, for the transcendent. So that's where he starts – with what they all have in common. He begins by saying that he sees how extremely religious they are. Some translations say “superstitious” because Paul was disdaining their

polytheism. But if I'm right and he's trying to find that common ground, then this translation would be the better one.

Being extremely religious. What does that mean exactly? The Encyclopedia of Religion begins its definition by quoting various folks: some emphasized the supernatural, some emphasized power, some ethics. The root comes from the Latin which means tie, or bond. We could think of religions along a continuum, from superstition on one end to agape love and putting on the mind of God on the other. You'll remember that ancient religions primarily sought to placate the gods who they felt were responsible for both the good and the bad things that happened. They needed to keep the fertility gods happy or the war gods on their side. As an aside, that was why the Romans were so upset when the Christians refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods – they thought that the health and well-being, indeed the very existence, of the empire depending on the good will of the gods. So a refusal to sacrifice was almost an act of treason.

So, on that end, religion can be seen as a very human response to the recognition of our vulnerability. Things happened then, perhaps more so than now, without explanation and people tried not only to make sense of their world, but also to control it. Religion on this first level is basically about being safe. There was undoubtedly

some of that in the group Paul was addressing. But there was more – these were the philosophers of Athens, used to searching out and debating the deepest human questions: what is truth? What is beauty? What is Justice? What is goodness? These are questions much further along the spectrum.

So I wonder if we can't understand Paul as recognizing their search as a deeply human search, the same as his own.

Paul, as a Jew, was a monotheist. So he would have been deeply offended by all the idols. But, again, he was able to see beneath the surface to what those idols represented. And here, I think, it would be good for us to think about our present day idols. It would be a lot easier if our idols were the obvious ones, like Aaron's golden calf, or the carved statutes Paul was probably seeing. Ours are more hidden, embedded in attitudes. I think this time of quiet can be a blessing in that it can offer time for reflection – about our lives, about what matters ultimately, and about what we may put in that place of the ultimate that doesn't belong there, which is the definition of an idol – making something that is only contingent into an absolute. Worshipping something that doesn't deserve worship. I think our recent crisis has made some of them visible.

After the decision to open up the state by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, I was appalled to see some of the pictures of people in bars; perhaps even more appalling were the pictures and articles about people showing up armed at state capitols demanding their “freedom.” I suggest that the idol there is complete individualism coupled with self-will – I want to do what I want, regardless of its effect on others. That’s an idol; it’s also a complete perversion of what the Founding Fathers had in mind. Their vision was of a communitarian society where individuals were willing to put their own self-interest aside for the well-being of the larger community.

There are other idols as well. Because we’re human and vulnerable, one idol is safety and security, which can show itself as a kind of exclusive nationalism, or militarism. Another one is consumerism – one person I read said that with the shutdown of stores and restaurants, she was brought face to face with the realization that she spent almost all her time eating and shopping.

As humans we also long for something larger than ourselves, something to which we can commit our lives. We long for completion and for respect and for meaning. That’s what we’re searching for. That’s what those ancient Greeks were searching for. That’s what Paul recognized in them – our common humanity, our common search, whether we articulate it or not.

And here a quick look at John where Jesus is promising, as he has all along, that our deepest longings will be satisfied by a life in him. And that life in him is characterized by keeping the commandment to love – to live the same life Christ lived, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, acting for justice. That’s the kind of religion that is on the other end of spectrum. If that’s our religion we’ll understand what Jesus meant when he said, “I am in my Father and you in me and I in you.” When we’re living that kind of life, a Kingdom life, we can be the light in a dark world, a light that’s desperately needed.

And since that can sound as abstract as a philosopher’s discussion in Athens, I found some concrete suggestions that I think are worth pondering:

1. Make a conscious daily decision to turn your life over to God.
2. Read some Scripture, even just one verse, every day.
3. Go to church even if it’s on You Tube!
4. Forgive whoever has offended you, whether or not they are sorry for having done so. I remember reading somewhere that holding resentment against someone was like taking poison and expecting the other person to die. Resentment erodes the soul of the one holding it.
5. Give more money than you think you can without expecting any kind of repayment.

6. Allow for humor and play every day. Teilhard de Chardin is quoted as saying that the most infallible sign of the presence of God is joy.

That's one list. Maybe it would be a good idea to make your own. There are only two guidelines: whatever is on the list must move us further along toward coming to know and love God, and they must allow us to live lives of joy. Because it should be heaven all the way to heaven. Amen.