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St. Thomas Church
Homily 5.17.20
Acts. 17:22-31; 1 Peter
3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Open Windows

Imagine, if you can, that you are not living in the year 2020 but you are the Apostle Paul, a missionary in first century Greece, now a part of the mighty Roman Empire. You have traveled many dusty roads and sailed many windy nautical miles to arrive at one of the great intellectual and economic centers of the ancient world—Athens.

Along the way, you have had failures; you have had successes; you have experienced failure and you have experienced success; you have given birth to several, small churches around the Mediterranean and you are wondering if they will be able to keep the flame of hope alive without you; you are wondering where God is leading you and whether God's grace will be enough. Will God's grace be enough to lift you up high enough to be seen above the many, mighty temples in Athens made by human hands? Will the Spirit within you shine more brightly than the glittering gold faces of the local deities that preside over the city? And will you find the right words that will help reveal a God that is not yet known to the people.

Arguably one of the most powerful sermons recorded in the Bible—second only to Jesus' sermon on the mount--- Paul speaks into the human condition in a way that remains as relevant in our time as it did in his. In light of what we are experiencing in the era of Covid-19, many of us are left wondering about God's purposes, his mission, and his message. Some of us have found that we have more time to reflect on the meaning of our lives.

(2)

With routines and planning disrupted, we are all, in various degrees asking, “Where is God in all of this?”

In a recent survey done by the University of Chicago Divinity School, researchers report that the coronavirus outbreak has “prompted almost two-thirds of American believers to feel that God is telling humanity to change how it lives” and are searching for deeper meaning in the midst of this devastating outbreak. This appears to be true for all socio-economic and racial groups, but most visibly expressed within the African American community that has been one of the hardest hit by this outbreak.

So, you and I, like Paul, have a unique opportunity to address the question, “Where might God be in all of this?” It is obvious that Paul had done his homework. Instead of saying to the non-Christian people in Athens, “What you are all believing about God is all wrong!” he tries a different tact instead. Guided by the Holy Spirit, identified as the Advocate in today’s gospel lesson from John, he looks for the open window through which he can pass a message of hope into their seeking hearts. What was this window? It was the altar they had made for the unknown god.

The Greeks and the Romans—as Paul notes were a religious people--they had gods for war, for peace, for wine, for rain, for food, fertility and security. In so many ways their culture was just like ours. Only we would add a few extra gods to our list such as the gods of technology and petroleum. But at some point, in the history of Athens, there was a great plague that swept through the entire city—killing so many that the people began to wonder if they were praying to the right gods. So, what did they do? Just to be safe, and to cover all their bases, they created an altar to the “unknown god” with the hope that they could

(3)

find a god to deliver them from the climate of fear and terror that they had found themselves in.

While it might be tempting to dismiss the Greco-Roman religion of ancient times as merely superstition, on the day Paul spoke at the Aeropagus he would have likely been speaking to the wise and very learned who were trying, like him, to discover a life worth living and find the Truth (with a capital T). The Aeropagus was a very special place—a very prominent outcropping of rock near the Acropolis where philosophers (mostly Stoic and Epicurean) and other educated civic leaders would congregate to debate and deliberate and where judges would hold court and resolve disputes.

Paul was proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, their unknown god, right into the power center of their civilization. He saw the open window and their searching. He entered right in a challenging truth-telling kind of way and yet remained respectful of their journeys. In a similar way, I believe you and me are also invited to look for the open windows in our own culture and circles of influence—for we don't know how long they will be remain open. I am reminded of our next door neighbor from Africa who created tee shirts for his entire family that reads, "Just one more breath." My noticing the shirts launched the first spiritual conversation my neighbor and I have had in the ten years they have lived next door to us.

I believe the approach to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ offered by the apostle Paul provides a template for our sharing the Gospel in our contemporary world. This morning I only have time to mention two aspects of witnessing to our faith during these extraordinary times: authenticity and boldness.

(4)

Firstly, there is authenticity. Paul speaks to the human journey in terms that a diverse people could relate to and we would do well to do follow this precept as well. All of humanity comes from a common origin. Regardless of whether we are speaking of the first Neanderthal that began burying their family members with things they might need in the afterlife, to Paul himself who tried on different religions and philosophies before he found his way, his truth, and his life, to be Jesus Christ.

If we are honest and aware, on some level, we are all searching. I love the word Paul uses for this in today's story. This searching which is foundational to being human is translated as "groping" as one cautiously feeling his or her way along in the dark to get a hold of something tangible—something to hold onto and help us feel safer. Many of us have been floored by the times we have been living in. If we are to provide an authentic witness to the world, we need to be honest, and real about our own stories of searching and struggle. We first need to be human and then we need to be bold about proclaiming our faith in Jesus Christ who has come to save and heal us.

Just the other day I received an email from a parishioner who was seeking spiritual resources from an Episcopal point of view so she could be better versed in how to communicate with her adult son who is asking real questions about his faith during these extraordinary times. This is a great example of the kind of witnessing I am encouraging you do consider as a first step in owning and proclaiming your Easter faith.

Paul knew how to engage people. He wasn't afraid to ask or address hard questions that fellow human beings were asking. We, too, are a well-educated group, and many of us don't even realize how much

(5)

power and influence we could have if we really showed up to the “Aeropagus’s of our lives.”

God challenges and encourages each and every one of us to be prepared to “give an account for the hope that is living within us” and say, “Yes” to receiving the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate Advocate of well-timed Love, so we might enter open windows and find those who have made altars dedicated to the “unknown god” that we have come to know as Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.