

“In Whom We Live”

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork

Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – May 14, 2023

Sixth Sunday of Easter & Mother’s Day – Lesson: Acts 17:22-29

Loving God, may your Holy Spirit be felt in this community in this time of worship together. May we open our hearts to your presence, your compassion, your guidance, and your inspiration. And may each one gathered here find, in you, what is needed most this day. Amen.

Today we’re exploring one brief episode in the story of the Apostle Paul’s adventurous mission of church planting, preaching, and teaching in the Mediterranean world. He’s now been hanging out in Athens for a little while. He’s been preaching in the local synagogue and in the marketplace to anyone who will listen. And he’s been debating with some of the local philosophers as well.

Some of the folks he’s been talking to were a little skeptical of his message, it appears. And others may have just been wondering what this new outsider was up to. So, some of the community leaders take him to the Areopagus (the hill of Ares or Mars) which is this giant rock outcropping and landmark in the heart of town. It’s where the local aristocratic council gathers to hear and deliberate on societal matters. And they ask him to share more about this message he’s been spreading about Jesus the crucified and risen Christ. It sounds strange to them. What does it mean?

Though Paul is not on trial here, we do get a sense that the Athenian leaders want to see if he has something relevant and helpful to teach – or if they ought to reign this guy for the good of the city. And, though some are skeptics, there is also a genuine curiosity happening here, I think. The perspective of the author of Acts is that the Athenians were always interested in the latest news or fad, religious or otherwise. The author sees them as a bit shallow. But maybe it would be fairer to say they were curious and accepting of the religious and philosophical pluralism of their time. That’s not a bad thing.

After all, Athens was a pretty cosmopolitan place, a university town filled with a variety of intellectuals, and they liked their shrines and temples. Historians have also noted that there was actually a formal process to start a new religion in Athens that included sponsoring a deity, providing evidence that the deity wanted to live in Athens, and showing how the deity would, in turn, benefit the Athenians. So, though Paul’s perspective is different, if he wants to plant a church in Athens, he might need to jump through their hoops.

Now, Paul has some strong feelings about the religiosity of the Athenians. He is put off by their polytheism and their many shrines and temples. He sees it all as idolatry. I’m not sure that’s really a fair assessment. And we aren’t obligated to agree with his judgment. Nevertheless, I think even Paul sees this religious fervor as a curiosity that he can work with.

As Paul was wandering through town, he had come across an altar with the inscription, “to an unknown god.” And so, he uses this altar as the launchpad for his message.

What the Athenians have been worshipping as unknown is actually known and knowable, he proclaims. This God is the Creator of the world, the Giver of all life and breath to all living things, the Lord of heaven and earth. And yes, people all over the world search for, and can and will find this God, because God is actually not far from any of us.

And then Paul quotes their own poets, uses language familiar to them to help them understand, for God is the one in whom “we live and move and have our being.” And therefore, God is not confined to statues of stone, gold, or silver and God is not bound to a particular altar.

Paul goes on to preach a call to repentance for past wrongs and the promise of resurrection. The response is mixed. Some scoff. But others are open to further dialogue. And a few go all in and join him.

God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. I love that description. God is everywhere. We are living in God. God is both transcendent and personally present. God is not removed or unconcerned. God’s life-giving love is not dependent upon particular offerings and rituals. Instead, God loves freely. And calls us to the same kind of love. God is the very foundation, soul, and source of all life – the Ground of Being, to use the words of theologian and philosopher, Paul Tillich.

You know, I do think the Apostle Paul had a mystical side. He was profoundly changed and inspired by his own mystical conversion experience when he encountered the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. And his passion is not just for show. It comes from a profound experience of connection with God.

And so, I wonder if some of Paul’s worry about what he perceives as idolatry in Athens is because he is concerned that the Athenians might be replacing a real relationship with God (their creator and sustainer) with stuff – with statues and rote ritual.

The Athenians have a lot of altars, images, and rituals, a lot of stuff, but do they have faith? Does their faith ask anything of them? Does their faith inspire them to deeper living, deeper loving? If so, how? These are questions worth asking.

Much has changed since Paul visited Athens. The world is a different place in many ways. Paul traveled by foot and on some rather sketchy boats. You could fly or cruise to Athens, or simply watch Rick Steves from the comfort of your own home. Paul would be astonished by the technology we have access to (and I bet it would be hard to get him off of Twitter).

And yet, much is still the same too. People are still trying to live meaningful lives. We are still facing the perennial challenges of how to love our neighbors (and our enemies) and make the world a little better during our years upon this earth. And we are still seeking out, longing for, and encountering the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

And so, Paul’s message is still relevant today (though he wasn’t concerned about the staying power of his message). Paul and his contemporaries thought the world as they knew it was coming to an end and that all things would be transformed, resurrected, and renewed as the Kingdom of God,

the Kin-dom of God, would come to fruition in their lifetimes. Things didn't unfold as they expected. And yet, here we are still chasing that vision, living into that hope, and finding moments of Kin-dom along the way.

We probably shouldn't model our approach to dialogue with people of other faiths or of no religious affiliation after Paul. Paul liked a lively debate, but sometimes it got him kicked out of town. And we don't need to convince others or try to convert them to our perspective. We can embrace a much healthier and open interfaith perspective.

But I think we can learn something from Paul's passion. His faith was clearly contagious. And his trust in God was strong enough to carry him through some very rough and rocky times. We can be passionate and clear in our own faith convictions and, at the same time, open to the perspectives of others.

And we shouldn't take from this story a condemnation of all images and iconography (as some have tried to do in the past). But we should be reminded that God can't be confined to or fully defined by one image, one name, one concept, one cultural identity, or one pronoun. They are all metaphors – not idols, but ideas that point to a God who is all that and more. Like the hymn said, let us bring many names. That is beautiful and good.

And though Paul wondered if the Athenian's rituals were doing much for their relationship with God, that doesn't mean we don't need ritual, worship, spiritual practices, and special sacred spaces. We do. And we should engage them with joy, intention, open-heartedness, and enough flexibility to leave room for the Holy Spirit to move us in unexpected directions.

All of these practices of faith should help us to nurture our relationship with the God in whom we live and move and have our being, the God who is right here with us, loves us, strengthens us, and is always calling us into relationship with God's self and with one another.

I was pondering all of this the other day as I was dipping into a container of trail mix for a snack. And as I pulled out an almond, I remembered that I also wanted to talk about Julian of Norwich, the 14th century English mystic.

Why did my trail mix jog my memory? Because Julian had a vision in which she saw the entire universe, all that God created, in an object the size of a hazelnut in the palm of her hand. In seeing this small, fragile thing that could so easily be crushed into dust and dissolve into nothingness, she wondered why it all just didn't disappear, why don't we all just disappear. And the answer she received was that it lasts, it endures, and it ever shall endure because God loves it. "In this little thing I saw three properties," she wrote, "that God made it, God loves it, and God keeps it."

We don't actually know if Julian was her given name, or a name she claimed for herself because she was the anchoress at St. Julian Church in Norwich. She lived a reclusive life as a solitary nun. And in 1373, at the age of thirty, she nearly died from a severe illness (maybe plague or something else, we don't know). During her illness, she had a series of sixteen visions, including this one. She survived this near-death experience and lived to be eighty. Shortly after her recovery, she

wrote down her visions and her collection, *Revelations of Divine Love*, became the first work in English authored by a woman (at least as far as we know).

I also find Julian fascinating because she wasn't confined to the formal liturgy of her day when naming and talking about God. She called Jesus Christ our Mother – who in grace feeds us and nourishes us with tenderness and love. And her reflections on God's motherly love inspired the hymn we just sang.

Like Paul, Julian felt sustained and carried by God's deep love in her life. And like Paul, she affirmed that in the midst of uncertainty, chaos, hardship, illness, and even into death the God, in whom she lived and moved and had her being, would continue to carry her. And not only her, but all of us, all creation, all that is.

God carries us. As a mother tenderly and yet sturdily, carries her child. God carries us. As gently and carefully as you could carry a hazelnut in the palm of your hand, as if it is the most precious object in all the world. God carries us. No matter what state we're in. God carries us. In joy, yes. And in sorrow, anger, anxiety, and stress. God carries us. And like a mother, knows how to handle our temper tantrums. Through it all, the God in whom we live and move and have our being carries us.

I think both Paul and Julian knew this deep in their souls and experienced it personally. And I think they wanted others to experience it too. Paul worked tirelessly to share his message and help people build communities of faith. Even though she lived a cloistered life, Julian wrote down her visions of God's love so others could see what she saw, and she provided spiritual counsel to members of her community.

Both lived in turbulent times. Paul under the imperial control of Rome. And Julian through regional conflict and the tumultuous years of the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe.

We live in turbulent times too. It's part of the human condition.

And yet, through it all, God is with us. God carries us. God is right here. Not out there somewhere. But in the midst of it all with us.

And when we get caught up in the turbulence and worn out by the struggles of the chaos swirling around us, perhaps that's when we especially need to remember that God is not unknown. But instead, as Julian learned in her vision, God made us, God loves us, and God keeps us.

God made you. God loves you. And God keeps you.

Amen.