

“The End of All Our Exploring”
 delivered Sunday, May 16, 2010
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 Acts 17:16-34

Like Columbia, Athens was a university town where important ideas held great value for the intellectually curious. Unlike Columbia, the early Christian preachers took their message to the street corners, and in very public squares argued the philosophical and religious questions of the day. (Were I to go out and preach this sermon on the corner of Woodrow and Devine just now, you would think I’d lost it!) But if we allow ourselves to stand before Paul this morning – in that very public place on Athens’ Areopagus hill – and listen carefully to his famous defense of the faith, we will discover he is speaking not just to ancient matters, but also to contemporary concerns.

Before we get to Paul’s sermon, let me say a word about Athens at the time. Classics professor Robert Garland observes that the religious imagination of the Greeks was populated by gods and goddesses who could not always be counted upon, so the people faced a heavy burden of choice among the deities to worship. Because of the social and political impact of religion on the culture, there were specific rules and regulations that stipulated whether a new god could be considered “legitimate.” A proponent of any new religion had to demonstrate three claims. First, a human sponsor had to represent the new deity in question. Second, you had to prove that this deity was eager to establish residence in Athens. And finally, the deity had to provide some benefit to all Athenians as the mark of its good will. (1)

In other words, each god was subject to human judgment as to the worthiness of worship and benefit to the community, and shrines went up to various ones for everything from valor in warfare, to beauty and music, to the harvest and winemaking, to festivals and family life. Carrying the news of Jesus Christ into Athens then, would be like trying to persuade Columbia’s citizens that Jesus is better for our welfare – than landing Southwest Airlines in the Midlands, or success in completing the high tech economic development of Innovista, or a cure-all for every public problem from unemployment to poverty to crime – all good things, but largely about our welfare. My guess is, if asked, we’d have to say honestly we want Jesus and all those other things that would improve our lot in life, for we too worship at the altars of many little gods of benevolent possibility.

So Paul begins to preach: “Friends of Athens... Friends in Columbia...I have seen for myself that you are meticulous about religion, building many statues to various gods. As I strolled around town, I even noticed one temple dedicated to an unknown god. Let me tell you who that god is. It is the God I worship.” Then Paul begins to make his case: This God made the world and everything in it. As a parent gives life to children, God gives us life. In our search for God, Paul says, we fumble around and reach for other gods but God has already reached out to us. For in God we live and move and have our being. God is inseparable from us – like breath.

Well, up until this point, Paul’s sermon is a pretty palatable, delivered with great oratory skill. He appeals to intellectual reason of the Athenians; he even quotes one of their poets! He has their rapt attention, right through this nice notion that we are God’s own children, but then he starts to meddling...

The tone of his sermon suddenly turns from pastoral to prophetic, from reasoned appeal to direct challenge, from quoting poetry to pointing his finger. Paul warns, now this God is a

jealous God, and not one to permit worship of other gods. He has been raised from the dead and will judge the earth one day. (We know, of course, that he is talking about Jesus, even if he doesn't name the name.) When Paul finished with those words about "the judge being raised from the dead," they laughed. The crowd began to disperse, as if to say, "you had us up till there!"

Suddenly the sermon was no longer just about how God would benefit them, but about how they might live in response to the life they had been given. Paul's God wants something from us...faithfulness, obedience to Jesus Christ, who is forever reaching out to the needy and the outsider. Paul's God wants total devotion, a singularity of focus, the high expectation that we find abundant life in Christ by giving our lives away in service like his. No wonder only a handful of people became converts, including Dionysius, a member of the City Council, and a woman named Damaris.

It is a harsh word – we will be judged, fairly and with righteousness, but judged nonetheless. But it is also a gracious word. When we get that – according to the Apostle Paul, that God wants a relationship with us, that includes our responding to God's goodness and grace – then we will find what we have been looking for. In all our searching for a benevolent Creator, in a cruel and often uncreative world, Paul assures us that – in Christ – God has been closer to us than we could have imagined.

In his poem, "Little Gidding," T. S. Eliot recalls a chapel in the English countryside where he had returned and reflected on his life and faith, saying: "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." (2) It is the poet's way of saying that sometimes the most obvious, the simplest things are at the same time the most profound. We go searching for something and we end up right where we began – only to discover that what we were looking for – was there all along. Paul says that's what God is like. We may search high and low, but it is God who comes to us.

I think of the times in my own life when I have felt the close presence of God. Rarely have those times come while I've poured over books on theology, or pondered the latest religious fad, or debated the nuances of the Bible in a class. No, they have come in the every day, as revelations to my heart and soul, and awakened in me some sense that God is near. Sometimes it's as simple as the observation of light streaming in the window, or the canopy of stars in the night sky filling me with awe and wonder. Sometimes it's the deep awareness that the prayer being offered up from the hospital bed, or among a family doubled over in grief, is actually heard. I imagine these days that God is close enough for us to hear holy rage at the oil spill in the Gulf, and its threat to – how does the Bible put it? – "every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind," that God blessed and called good. Surely God stands in judgment of us – to be less dependent on cheap energy, and more responsible stewards of this good earth. As Judge and gracious Savior, God is closer to us than we sometimes think.

Just ten years ago, when he was ninety-two, Howard Mumma, a United Methodist pastor wrote a book about his time serving the American Church in Paris in the 1950's. He became friends with the French philosopher and Nobel Prize winning author, Albert Camus, who was trying to make sense out of the devastation in Europe following World War II, and the atrocities that led up to and continued during the war. Associated with the existentialists, his literary works like "The Stranger" probed radical individualism, and "The Plague" tried to make meaning out of human suffering and random disaster in the seeming absence of a benevolent God. Camus

came to the church initially just to hear Marcel Dupre play the organ, but then he began to stay for the sermons. Then he and the pastor started conversations about matters of faith which Mumma kept confidential until 40 years after Albert Camus died.

“I have been coming to church because I am seeking,” Camus confided in him. “I am searching for something the world is not giving me...” “I don’t know if it is personal, or if it is a great idea or powerful influence – but I know there is something that can bring meaning to my life. On Sunday mornings, I hear the answer is God.” Apart from their meetings, Camus read and marked up his bible; he wrestled with characters like Jonah and Nicodemus. He told Howard Mumma, “One of the things that I have noted in the Bible is that many of its chief characters are confused – just like the rest of us... We are all seeking something, whether it is confidence or knowledge or something else entirely... We are all on a journey.”

Kindly patient with his struggle to understand the Christian faith, and several years into their conversations, Howard Mumma tried to help Camus in his spiritual quest by saying: “In Jesus Christ God has wiped the slate clean. Just turn toward God, “so that your guilt, your concerns, your worries, and the mistakes that you have made in the past are forgiven, and the slate is truly wiped clean. Then you are ready to move ahead and commit yourself to a new life, a new spiritual pilgrimage. You are finding the presence of God himself.” Albert Camus looked at him with tears in his eyes and said, “Howard, I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to,” and then he asked to be baptized. Mumma said, “But Albert, haven’t you already been baptized?”

Indeed – he had as a young child, and the great philosophical seeker finally came to see that God had been there with him all his life – like breath. (3)

The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started...is precisely what Paul is saying to the crowd gathered around him in Athens, and to us. We can search and search and search for God, but Paul is confident, that if we open ourselves to the life offered in Jesus Christ, we will find that God has been close to us all along. The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know it for the first time for “in God we live and move and have our being.” AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Anthony Robinson and Robert Wall, *Called to be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day*, p. 215.
- 2) Eliot quoted by Jon Walton in a sermon on this text, “We Arrive Where We Started,” Westminster Presbyterian, Wilmington, DE, 5/16/93.
- 3) Howard Mumma, *Albert Camus and the Minister*, excerpted in *The Christian Century*, June 7, 2000.