

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Searching for God”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**6th Sunday of Easter (Year A)
May 21, 2017
Psalm 66:8-12, 16-20; Acts 17:22-31**

Recently, during a lunch break, I picked up a local news magazine to look through. As I flipped through its pages, I realized I was reading a New Age magazine.

On the page opposite an article about flower remedies for emotional well-being, my eyes fell upon an attractive advertisement with the words, “Come journey with us! There is something wonderful happening here.” The ad was for a spiritual community in Raleigh called “Journeys.” The ad continued:

“If you combine . . .

- The teachings of Jesus
- The heart of Buddha
- The wisdom of Black Elk
- The creativity of Abraham
- The goodness of Gandhi
- The insight of Emerson and Thoreau
- The dream of Martin Luther King
- The optimism of Ernest Holmes
- The humanity of Mother Teresa

. . . then you are traveling our path.”¹

¹ *natural awakenings: HEALTHY LIVING*, April 2008, Triangle Edition

Wow. A religious salad bar of sorts. Start with a base of Jesus, throw in some MLK and Mother Teresa and sprinkle with a little Buddha. Add some Emerson and Thoreau for color and drizzle with a Black Elk dressing. Voila! Based on this model, any religious teaching that you find meaningful can be added to your mix.

Sounds a little like the Athenians in today's passage, doesn't it?

In our passage for today, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, finds himself on an unexpected detour into Athens, a place in which people also liked to cover all their spiritual and religious bases. Paul had not intended to go to Athens at all. Instead, some faithful Christians from Berea, rerouted him to Athens to keep him safe from the angry Thessalonians who were ready to riot in Berea (see Acts 17:1-15).

As he arrived unexpectedly, he became more-or-less a tourist, killing time while waiting on Silas and Timothy to join him so that their missionary journey might continue. He saw all the main attractions of the city, as a tourist might, but

[o]f all the things Paul saw, one seemed to make the greatest impression on him. It was not that this city was beautiful, or one of the great cultural and intellectual centers of the world. It was not that great men, like Plato and Aristotle once walked these streets and taught there. It was that this great city was filled with . . . idols.²

Paul recognized immediately that the Athenians were searching. And he knew exactly what they were searching for. So, he cut his sightseeing tour short, headed straight for the Jewish synagogue, and began to argue with the devout persons there. When he finished in the synagogue, he made his way to the marketplace and told his story to any who happened to be there. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers heard him speak and began to debate him in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the town center. In this place, Paul became the first Christian philosopher, using Stoic and Jewish arguments. Some who heard him in the marketplace made disparaging remarks, calling

² Bob Deffinbaugh, Th.M. "The Apostle in Athens, Preaching to Philosophers (Acts 17:15-34)." I found this article on textweek.com.

him a “babbling” which in Greek referred to a “person who makes a living by picking up the scraps.”³ Others believed him to be proclaiming foreign divinities – Jesus and Anastasis, the Greek word for “resurrection.” But new divinities were a fascination for these philosophers, so many stayed to hear more, and invited Paul to speak in a more secluded place. The people of Athens and other foreigners who had gathered there wanted to hear or talk about something new, anything new, and Paul’s message piqued their interest. They invited him to the Areopagus to hear more about this strange new teaching.

Seasoned speaker that Paul is, he begins by affirming his audience. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” I can almost imagine the gathered philosophers nodding their heads in pleased agreement. Paul lets them know that he has been through the city, looking carefully at their objects of worship. Their pride continues to swell, no doubt, as they hear Paul speak of their beloved city. But then he suddenly changes course. In the middle of his verbal tour of the city, he stops dead in his tracks. “I found among these objects of worship an altar with the inscription, “to an unknown god.” “What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” And he tells them about the God he worships who,

- Is the creator of the world and everything in it
- Is the Lord of heaven and earth
- Doesn’t live in shrines made by human hands
- Does not need anything from humans
- Gives all people life and breath and all things
- Is the parent of all nations on the earth
- Is the God for whom all would search, maybe even grope in order to find
- Is the God in whom we live and move and have our being

³ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), from text notes, p. 219 New Testament.

Paul goes on to proclaim that as God’s offspring, we ought not to think that God might be fashioned in gold or silver or stone or art or imagination. God calls all to relationship with him through repentance. Interestingly, nowhere yet in this proclamation has Paul mentioned Jesus. And in the end, he never mentions Jesus by name at all. Rather Paul, who knows his audience well, remains on safe territory, using philosophical understandings of God that are familiar to those gathered. Until the very end. For Paul knows that an understanding of God through creation alone, through nature alone, is incomplete – incomplete without an understanding of what God has done through Christ Jesus his Son. Paul knows, Will Willimon writes:

Something else is needed. Paul mentions the resurrection – a fact completely contradictory to our observation of the way the world works. In nature things die, decay, decline. Death is death. What is done is done, over and finished, ended. Yet Paul concludes his speech with the assertion that for Christians the resurrection of Jesus is our “assurance.” Not grass growing in the spring, the return of the robin, the opening of the cocoon, or any other naturalistic drivel; the resurrection, something beyond the natural, is the final assurance that this one is the “Lord of heaven and earth.”⁴

POW!

What is interesting to me in this passage is that the reaction to this proclamation about God acting beyond the natural brings no major reaction from anyone there! A few scoff, “pssshh,” “whatever,” and walk off. A few others nod and indicate that they’d like to hear more someday. And a few joined him and became believers. As is his fashion, Luke mentions a pair, a man and a woman, who hear Paul’s message and believe.

⁴ *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Acts*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988). p. 144.

Not exactly a Billy Graham revival, was it? A few followers and some others who remained curious? But something important happened that day in this city or Luke wouldn't have included it in his book of Acts.

Here's what I think. I think Paul knew that those Athenians, like the rest of us, were searching for meaning, searching for depth, searching for more in life than the getting up and going to work or school and coming home every day. They had a God-shaped hole in their hearts and they were searching for ways to fill it by building idols and putting their trust in precious metals and beautiful sculptures. But they kept coming up empty and so they kept searching. Paul knew this. He had been searching himself not so long ago. He had tried to fill his God-shaped hole with his own idol of religious persecution. He knew that these attempts to create meaning out of finite construction or wishful thinking would lead nowhere. And he knew he had met on the side of a road to Damascus the One who was infinite light and infinite love. He had a message to tell about a deep and permanent God, no longer unknown to the people of Athens, but now KNOWN in Jesus Christ. As usual for Paul, he did not wait for the people of the world to come to the Synagogue to hear him speak. He came to them, in their own places and spaces, using their own Socratic method of speaking, using words they understood and could relate to. He came in love to tell of the One who had filled his God-shaped hole and who would fill theirs as well.

When Paul came to Athens, he didn't destroy the idols he saw or condemn the people for their idolatry. No. In fact, he praised them for the fact that they longed for a god that would fulfill them and searched for god they could know. He didn't convince them all during that brief time in Athens, but he planted seeds in their hearts that he prayed would grow until they came to know that unknown god as the God of all creation, the God of all heights and depths, the God of all people and nations.

I can't help but think of the Moogfest concerts we hosted here this weekend and all the people who gathered to hear music in this place. When they looked around and

above them, behind all the speakers and sub-woofers, what did they see? The empty cross, the stories told in the stained glass, and, perhaps more importantly, a space that welcomed them just as they were. No one was there to convert them or lecture to them. The space was theirs for the weekend because this community believes God calls us to a ministry of hospitality. Will our worship suddenly be filled with dozens of Moogfest attendees today and in the weeks to come? I doubt it. But a seed of the love and welcome of the God we know and want to share may have been planted in the hearts of some, and by God's grace, perhaps it will grow to begin to fill their God-shaped hole.

My friends, we worship a God bigger than any idol we might create with our hands, bigger than any image we might form in our minds, bigger than any amalgamation of philosophers or prophets or philanthropists we might seek to follow. We worship a God beyond our ability to comprehend, who has come to us in the human person of Jesus Christ and has gone beyond the realms of the natural world to show love for us. We come to this place to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and to proclaim it in the places and spaces of the world – the message of love, inclusion, hope, and peace. May you plant the seeds of God's love along life's way – this week and always. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2017. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.