

Acts 17:22-31  
May 14, 2023

## The Religious Life

The world is diverse. One response is to engage; learn about other cultures, find points in common, interact, celebrate differences. Another option is to enclave, to be surrounded by those who are similar, speak the same language, have similar ideas, similar practices.

I confess that most of my life has been spent in the suburbs or satellite towns like Delaware, of midwestern American cities like Columbus or St. Louis. I haven't ventured much out of the Mississippi River drainage basin. I never learned to speak another language nor got used to what to me would be a strange diet.

I have seen pictures of, and heard tales about, and sometimes even come into proximity with other parts of the grand show, but I am afraid that I wouldn't have made a very good Paul, who seemed to be able to swim in any ocean, with any school of fish . . . so to speak.

Paul came from Tarsus in Cilicia, which was a province right in the middle of what is now called, Turkey. He was Jewish in a Gentile world, a Roman citizen, able to travel around and function well in a variety of settings.

The Book of Acts tells of his journeys. He spent time in Syria, in Arabia, and in Israel. Eventually he would go west to Rome and some believe even Spain. It is

with the European part of the story that we are concerned this morning; his visit to Athens in particular, the great cosmopolitan city, the hometown of Plato and Aristotle, the capital of Greek culture that had conquered all the way to India. It must have been as frightening or as fascinating to him as Tokyo, or Beijing would be for us, or Istanbul or Katmandu, or maybe even New York or Los Angeles.

The speech he gave in this setting is well-known. It is called the, "Areopagus Speech," because of where he was when he gave it. The Hill of Ares is near the Acropolis, and was so named because of a mythical trial held there at which the god Ares was tried for murder. It had become a place where councils met and decisions were made. In other words, it was a courthouse.

Paul found a way to engage the people there. He looked around at all their images and statues and said, "I can see that you are all very religious." The truth is that everyone is religious in the sense of living life according to a set of beliefs and values, and also practices that can sometimes be called rituals.

Nowadays there is a large group of people who claim to be, "spiritual," but *not* "religious." It sounds like what they are saying is that they are religious in one way, but not in another. What they mean is that they do not participate in organized religion. Most people are either very religious, or their lives are not very well ordered. I wonder how Paul would have engaged the nones.

There was a statue to an unknown god. Perhaps they were hedging their bets. The “unknown god,” was a hook to engage them, and some of them took the bait. In the speech he talked about life, and in its most famous line, he spoke of the reality, “in which we live and move and have our being,” which was a part of the hook, because it was a line from a Greek poet.

That reality is God, the maker of heaven and earth, the one who is not served with human hands, as if he needed anything, because God gives each one us, “life and breath, and everything else.” Paul began to introduce them to the Hebraic God revealed both in scripture, and in Jesus.

There is no doubt that the phrase, “in whom we live and move and have our being,” is powerful and suggestive. Whenever I read this passage it always causes me to stop and think.

It links God to everything in the natural order; the air we breathe, the water we drink and use to cleanse our bodies, and in which we are baptized; the mountains, rivers and oceans, plants and animals.

It also links people to people, for we live every moment of our lives in community with other people; neighbors, co-workers, teammates, classmates, family, those in the community of faith, here in this room, and all the connections the world over as well. It tells that God is in the middle our lying down and our getting up, our eating, working, and playing, the doing of all our chores, our worship, our service.

God is all around and within our life. It almost sounds like the Star Wars religion of the Force, or perhaps the religion of the Force was partly taken from, inspired by this text, who knows?

It may challenge us to think of living and moving and having our being in God when life gets troubled, storms arise, and all the messiness of the messes people make, and our own messes, combine to make our lives hard, sometimes beyond bearing. But even then we are in God.

For all of that it is only a hook. It does not reveal anything like the fulness of the biblical or the Christian understanding of God’s nature, but it invites one to hear, or seek to hear more, and that is what the people there said they wanted.

Let me suggest one characteristic of God’s nature that we *can* consider, one step further we can take in the understanding of God that begins with the line in this speech. The, “god.” that is introduced to these religious searchers is not very personal, a kind of ambience or atmosphere, like being in a house, or a church, or a stadium, or a forest.

Yet, from the beginning of the Christian faith, believers have claimed that at some point, the experience of the divine *is very personal*, and speak of that experience as a relationship *with a person*.

God is referred to as a Father, for instance, or on this day we could also say, a Mother. God is nurturing and

kind, patient and forgiving, as well as righteous, mighty and strong. The great command is to love God with our whole person, and that has rings of a mother's love in it; that does not sound like the kind of love that would be directed towards a general sense of being-ness.

It begins with a set of convictions about God, followed by a pattern of life that is designed to remind us of who God is, and who we are, what we are to do as we live out our days. That sounds like a religious life, but one directed to a specific end; to be in relation to God; to know mercy, and kindness, goodness, and love, resurrection and repentance.

The places we meet, the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the service we render, are aimed to these ends, that we might reach out to God, and find God, in whom we meet God, in whom live and move and have our being.

And the result of this religion is a fuller and richer experience of life all around. Along the way perhaps, we can become less enclaving and more engaging, and in the end, we are found in eternal life, which is the salvation of our souls.

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.

30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

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