

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church
Pastor: Rev. Kathryn M. Treadway
April 27, 2008

Acts 17:22-31

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' ²⁹Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

What Does God Look Like?

A man posted the question, "What does God look like?" on the internet, hoping for a variety of creative answers. His rules were as follows: *I'm not talking about "God is everything, God looks like the whole universe, blah...." I mean, we tend to anthropomorphize our deities, so what does YOUR deity look like, in YOUR mind's eye? When you think of God, or Goddess, or your personal deity, what mental image arises? When you pray, or commune with your deity, or worship, or ritual or contemplate your God, what appearance does He or She take?*¹

¹ <http://askville.amazon.com/God/AnswerViewer.do?requestId=6517506> – includes question & answers

The answers revealed the complex variants of people in our world who are worshiping God. One man replied, *In my belief system, God is an eternal energy. I have never attached a face to God, and I don't think I will be able to. Because, in my opinion, God is an eternal energy, and inspiration, which lives everywhere and in everyone. So when I close my eyes and try to think about God, I see bright but gentle light.* Another wrote, *The Bible says God made man in His image. That means that man looks like God or vice versa God looks like a person. The difference is that people are made of flesh and blood but God is a Spirit. There is no way of knowing if God has long or short hair or a beard or no beard, etc. But the basic shape is that of a human being so that is as close to saying what God looks like as you can get.* Another uses a TV image to answer the question. *There is an episode where Homer talks to God about religion and stuff. God is giant compared to Homer and they never really show his face just the lower part and his long beard. I know it sounds horrible and like blasphemy, but that's what I think of when people mention God. It's just that's what I watched growing up, and that's something that mattered to me.* And another posted a radical poem.

*Like the sick man sleeping on the grating,
or the prisoner who's just been tasered;
Or the man who held the taser
And goes home to watch TV.*

*He's the one caught by Katrina,
the white man's bridge forbidden him;
He wears an orange suit in Cuba;
and he's naked in Sudan.*

*Raped and hacked till death is welcome,
she searches, bleeding, for her children.
Or, if her son's plane's downed in error,
Learns that 'stuff happens' in the 'war on terror.'*

*She gets six hours sleep 'cos the firm went down,
And 'workfare,' 'compassionate conservative,' came to town;
She hasn't time to teach her kids to learn,
But if they go too far she gets to watch 'em burn.*

*What does God look like? depends where you search:
Not in robes on benches, and not in any church
That's rich, and says that money stands for His reward;
A kind and loving teacher, at home amongst the poor:
That's my Lord.*

In today's Gospel lesson, Paul walked around Athens to try to get a picture of what God looked like to the Athenians. What he discovered was a bunch of very religious people, much like those who responded to the internet question. They had images and statues of gods and goddesses throughout the town, even establishing one to the Unknown God just in case they had missed something. The Athenians in today's scripture remind me a lot of people living in our world.

They wanted to cover all of their bases. They were religious to the point of being superstitious, not wanting to upset any god by leaving them out. They wanted to get it right but were so inundated by information that they didn't know where to begin. Not to mention, they respected pluralism, and they enjoyed dialoging about differences of belief. And Paul walked into their forum and acknowledged that he respected their sincere spirituality, much as we appreciate the differences that surround us, but Paul wanted a chance to share what his God looked like too. And so he was given the floor.

"The "Areopagus" was both a place and a group. It's a small rocky hill northwest of the Acropolis in Athens. . . . More importantly, the Areopagus was the most prestigious and venerable council of elders in the history of Athens, so-named because it met on that site. Dating back to the 5th-6th centuries BCE, the Areopagus consisted of nine *archons* or chief magistrates who guided the city-state away from rule by a king to rule [by a group of people who] laid the foundations for Greece's eventual democracy. Across the centuries the Areopagus changed, so that by Paul's day it was a place where matters of the criminal courts, law, philosophy and politics were adjudicated."²

Paul was a new convert to Christianity with an intellectual background. He had been trained by some of the brightest scholars and steeped in the Jewish faith from his earliest days. Yet on the road to Damascus, he had been confronted by a bright light and a voice from heaven asking why he was persecuting Christians. And then conversion happened as he believed in his heart that the Way of Christ was to be both believed and taught to others. Paul felt called to go from place to place meeting people where they were and showing respect for who they were, yet also sharing without fear what he believed. He wanted people to listen to him just as he would respectfully listen to him, and he tried to share in the common language, a language people would hear and understand.

So Paul began by pointing out what he had seen in their town – many gods, one specifically that was the “just in case we forgot” god. And Paul goes on to tell them just exactly who that God was that they had forgotten, or perhaps never met. ²⁴*The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,* ²⁵*nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.* ²⁶*From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,* ²⁷*so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.* ²⁸*For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’*

And then Paul calls them to repentance.

² <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080421JJ.shtml>

And while the scriptures told us that many “sneered” when they heard Paul’s message, we do learn, if we continue, that at least one of those magistrates did repent and believed. Dionysius became another follower of the Way of Christ. (Acts 17:32-33)

What I love about Paul’s approach to evangelism is that he shared where the people were. He did not ask people to come to him. He went out into the community and met people where they were. Successful business owners know this philosophy. They don’t just place an ad in the paper and expect that to be enough to drum up business. Rather, they meet people in the community, setting up booths at community events or talking about what they do at a meeting of the Rotary club or inviting their friends to come and check things out.

The church has the potential to resemble Paul’s example. In my research, I came across a story about a man who was evangelizing much like Paul. The author wrote, “At lunch last week it was my pleasure to meet a young computer scientist from London who for the last four years has taught at Stanford as a specialist in artificial intelligence. Neil is also a deeply committed Christian who’s exploring what it might look like to witness in the work place among his un-churched, thirty-something friends. I was fascinated as he described how he and his buddies back in London understood “church.” Forget church at 11am on Sunday, he said. Rather, meet your friends for sports and games on Sunday, then repair to the pub. Meet people on their own terms and at their own places, he said, rather than expect them to come to your church. Where are the peoples’ terms and places in the world in which you inhabit? Do you envision church as happening on the golf course or around the bridge table? Do you talk about God at the Moose Lodge or on the lake or at the place where you go dancing?

Yesterday I went to Fireman’s Field to watch the girls perform their cheerleading routine. Within minutes one of the parents began telling me that her best friend’s mother was about to die and she was trying to hold it together in front of the kids. Shortly after that I learned that one of the assistant coaches of the team had passed away in a motorcycle accident the morning before and all of the other coaches were wiping away tears at this event. Should I wait for people to come to me and ask for help? Should I give priority to those who are church members? No, I offered care and compassion before they could ask.

The message in today’s scripture is the same. We are asked to meet people where they are and to share the Way of Christ as we wonder together what God might look like. We can head into the beauty shop and tell the hairdresser where we’ve seen God working this week. But then we also need to listen to where they’ve seen God. We are not called to force our beliefs on others but to dialog with others about why we believe as we do while listening to the reasons they believe as they do. As we listen to each other, we develop a relationship through which God begins to unveil God’s self with clarity.

Beginning in June, the session has approved our going out into the community. In addition to our regular worship services, I will also be meeting people around the dinner table to talk and to listen as we “*search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not*

far from each one of us.” The people I hope to meet are people who do not have a church and are not sure they want a church. They are people who are searching for something that is true, something that is calling to them from deep within.

Who will you meet and where will you meet them? Don't be afraid to take Paul's approach and begin by asking them what God looks like. I am certain that God will begin to reveal God's self as you share what it is you believe. Amen.