

“What does this babblor want to say?” (29Apr18)
Acts 17:16-34

There’s something strange in this speech, but not how the crowd expects.

I do like the line “in whom we live and move and have our being.” There’s reasonable stuff on perceiving our Creator and connection to God, neighbor, and creation.

But it’s strange in its ambiguity, its lack of specificity. It seems to try to deal with a generic God, refusing to name anything more explicit. At our heart, however, we reside scandalously in a particularity. That’s ignored here, left indistinguishable, without Jesus.

Starting next week, we’ll hear from one of Paul’s letters and his actual words, and I hope you’ll notice it’s just thick with Jesus, through and through, absolutely grounded and inescapably reverberating with Jesus, in relationship, totally in love with you.

Even the story of Paul’s own conversion two weeks ago wasn’t just a transformational spiritual experience or cognitive comprehension of God. A voice immediately declared, “I’m Jesus, whom you’re persecuting.” That was clearly the focus, the main point and central identity, reshaping relationship.

That contrasts with today’s speech with only sidelong allusions and no direct mention of Jesus at all. Maybe when *we* hear about one who came back from the dead we think of Jesus, because we expect it in church after Easter. But if we’d never heard of Jesus, it’s tough to imagine this would offer much clarity.

Something I read this week noted this speech has long been a model for how we interact in interfaith settings, with other religions, or even for converting people. But, other risks aside, it’s tough to imagine what they’d be converting *to*, since this never seems to resolve or define. It remains somehow spiritual and not religious. Maybe that’s even part of its appeal.

Yet I can’t help but be wary of how it minimizes distinctions while manipulatively co-opting others’ beliefs. It shoots for a lowest common denominator, and fails to capture so much of what we identify in being created in the

image of God, in sacrificial love, in proclaiming forgiveness instead of just rules for righteousness, in identifying with the least of these, of the God who abides with us through suffering and brings us through death. Those rather particular aspects for us get left out when we overgeneralize and we bypass Jesus.

I’m also concerned in the speech that the expertise isn’t with the ones who have been worshipping but in the religion-splaining one who says, “let me tell you what you’ve actually been doing.” This is the risk whenever we try to declare, “Well we pretty much all believe the same thing anyway.” Buddhists don’t need to hear they’re going to your heaven. Native Americans shouldn’t be told they have basically the same view of nature as you. There’s danger in how we treat the Old Testament/Hebrew scriptures for Jewish siblings who share them with us. I even have to confess some hesitancy about our African song liturgy, and that fine divide whether we’re being enriched by another’s experience and appreciating their identity, taking it seriously or just playing around to feel good about it.

That wariness pairs with the description in the reading of the Athenians, that they thought of themselves as cosmopolitan into wanting to be cutting edge and up-to-date and open-minded. If this applies to us, we run the risk of chasing flights of fancy, unmoored from any solid definition and lasting identity. Whether we’re talking about our taste in worship or our personal lives, we know we shouldn’t give in to fads and be distracted by the latest popular craze, so impulsive as to be unable to keep our attention on what is important and instead always wanting a change. If we define ourselves as too open, we may not hold to who we truly are.

A really helpful term for this set of dangers is “moralistic therapeutic deism.”* Somehow a trend develops that basically we end up with a disengaged God, with religion mainly for how we can feel good about ourselves. This little God is only involved for the sake of guidelines for our behavior—broad categories of “be nice to each other, respect differences, enjoy life”—and our

* see *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean, p14

practice becomes pursuit of our self-assured sense of success.

I'm actually hoping that sinks in a bit and strikes you. We too much suspect church is for learning how to be good people, that your investment here is supposed to pay off in increasing your happiness (and, if it doesn't, then you'd be better off looking elsewhere), and that whatever is proclaimed here should affirm positions you already hold, your political loyalties or efforts in relationships. Church gets boiled down to a weekly pat on the back.

But that's not our fundamental basis. Boiling this down, sorting through all the accumulated extras, coming back to our foundation and bedrock leaves us with Jesus. For us, that identity is rather specific and rather vital. We don't operate by general metaphors of new birth emerging from the compost of old death. This isn't love generally, not vague notions of benign warm spirituality.

We have the scandalous particularity of putting a name on all of this, on saying that when we look for explanations and engagements and hope, we are looking for God in the person of Jesus. It is his life, his death and resurrection, that bear the clearest witness for us. It is his teaching that guides us. It is his promise that sustains us. It is in *him* that we live and move and have our being, and simultaneously in us that Jesus lives and moves and has his being.

I want you to hear good news in that. I want you to be able to recognize that existence isn't bound up in how you're doing with some set of expectations. It's not in morals or right worship or how well you're doing at being happy. It's not waiting for you to get it figured out and to sign on. If this is God, God must be big enough to be in whom we all exist. That means your existence is inseparable from God, from Jesus, from the one who wills life for you, whose work and dedication and passion in the universe is for your sustenance.

As the speech ended in Athens, some of the folks said they needed to keep pondering and hear more. Others scoffed and left. That's still the case. This sermon might help some of you and others will simply walk away. You might claim that's just fine, that everybody can discover their own

answers and their own approaches to the divine. Or you might be troubled, knowing loved ones who aren't plugged in to church, and you feel they're missing out and wondering why the message didn't work for them.

On either side, it invites us to evaluate why this is important. Do we look for church mainly as a social club? Or our outlet for doing good in the world? Is our practice here any different than another worshipping community, including next door in the Covenant Room? Why does this faith of ours matter? Why continue to deliberate over it and try to understand? How is being identified with Jesus important, vital, necessary for life?

With such questions and the speech's language about judgment, I don't want you to hear that as the verdict of whether you've done enough, understood enough, believed enough. Think about what it means to live in harmony with the universe, in accord with the one in whom we live and move and have our being, what it means to have a life shaped by and like Jesus, what it looks like to be invited to live with love, and our core definition as being loved.

There's a different sort of good news in this identity. Whereas the Athenians, seemed to have a casual disengagement that could either take or leave it, that didn't really seem to care if that was the shape of existence, for us finding ourselves with Jesus in this living, moving, breathing embodied relationship, it—maybe paradoxically—opens us to others, including to be conversant with new understandings.

Because relationship always means becoming something more, our faith shouldn't be the same as it was last year or when we were younger. Far from the mindless rigidity of "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," our trust and faith are honed with humility in relationship, in dialogue with other people, other religions and denominations, including in ongoing interactions and partnership here at the MCC. It involves engaging our time and place, of current struggles, of new insights from science. We have a unique and particular sense of existence, so we should and must pay attention to those new things, to be learning and continually re-evaluating.

Besides new questions, we remain with the old ones. A famous Roman Catholic statement on interfaith relations from 50 years ago said:

[People] expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir [our] hearts: What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Which is the road to true happiness? What...after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?*

With those questions, you may be asking—as the crowd has it in the New Revised Standard Version—“What does this babbling want to say?”

The proclamation of Paul and of Nick, the word of God is this: If those seem like big questions you might be coming down on the wrong side of or losing your grip on, if you're discouraged or confused, or worried about others, then remember with the God “who made the world and everything in it,” that there is no way to stray, because you are held as a beloved child of God, in whom “you live and move and have your being.”

And this one made known to us as Jesus, who forgives sins, who judges not based on your merits or understanding or efforts, but based on his passion and love for you, sees you as eternally beloved and worth giving up his life for, this one who was crucified, died, and was buried, and raised from the dead for you. That is the basis of our hope, the center of our identity, the shape of all existence. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

** *Nostra Aetate*, 1965

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html