

IS YOUR GOD TOO SMALL?

Acts 17: 16-34

“Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” These are words of Jesus found in the gospel. They are familiar words to many. But how do we interpret such words? Some of the biggest churches in North America and around the world interpret such words in a very particular way. Their version of the gospel is called: the prosperity gospel. You have to ask, seek and knock for very particular things, tangible things, practical things – things like money, health, relationships, love, a better job, friends, more success in life... Unless you ask, seek and knock, and unless you put some persistence and faith behind it, you will not receive it.

Of course, this kind of gospel is not new, and this kind of spirituality is not uniquely Christian. From ancient times until now, people have tried to harness the power of God or the gods in order to receive blessings of different kinds. People have tried to harness the power of God or the gods to protect them from harm. This also means that when things are not going well for you in your life then perhaps God or the gods are angry and you have to try harder to appease them and please them. This is the faith of Job’s friends in the bible. It is the faith of sacrifice. You sacrifice to God for many reasons, but the biggest reason is that you want God’s blessing and favour, and you want to avoid God’s wrath and punishment. The theology behind such praying is that God is almighty. This means God is in total control of all that is and all that happens. If you want to do well in life, you have to get on God’s good side and avoid the bad side. You have to be humble and grateful. You have to confess your sins regularly. And you have to sacrifice to God - your money and time, in order to receive the best and better.

Now even though this kind of faith is ancient, there are many versions of it in our world today even outside the prosperity gospel. Why do sports teams or athletes offer a prayer before or after a game? They’re hoping for God’s favour so that they do well. After the game, it’s gratitude for God’s favour they pray, and perhaps it’s to keep on God’s good side too. Now, I don’t want to belittle sincere heart-felt praying. But if the faith behind the prayer is that God has some kind of direct involvement in what happens in a game or in how I compete, maybe my God is too small. If I believe that praying, worshipping and doing all kinds of things for God as a kind of sacrifice will give me some advantage or some edge towards success in my personal and public life, then maybe my God is too small.

You see, it all becomes about me and how I can manipulate and influence a power greater than me to work for me. Faith in this way of thinking is about getting me more for my life according to how I choose what I want in my life. There’s no room in such faith for serious self-

questioning about my goals and motivations. There's no room in such faith for me to pray and worship so that I hear and discern what God wants, not necessarily what I want. The two are not necessarily the same at all. There is no room in such faith to reflect on the possibility that God may speak to me even more profoundly when things don't go the way I want them to go. Is it possible that I can discover a whole other way of believing and living if my understanding of God and how I pray to God has to change?

Let's explore an alternative way of believing and praying before God as we ponder Paul's sermon to the Athenians.

And let me begin by saying that the sermon Paul preaches is not very successful. We're told that the vast majority of his listeners didn't buy into his vision of God whatsoever. There were a few, but not many. Why, then, are the highlights of his sermon recorded in this book of the bible? Clearly, Paul's sermon had an impact on later readers like us. Even though his immediate audience didn't get stirred up and inspired, future generations of readers like us have gotten stirred up and inspired. So, what was it about the sermon that may do that? I believe it's the vision of God Paul proclaims. Let's explore such a vision a little more, and let me make a few points in this regard.

First of all, we're given the context which Paul is addressing in his sermon. The context is one where people are very spiritual. There are many idols, we're told. An idol is a sacred image or object. But what kind of spirituality do idols represent? Very much the spirituality I've mentioned just a few moments ago. An idol is something humans make. An idol is something you and I create and therefore something we can control. We pour into it all our wishes and dreams, our worries and concerns. By keeping it polished and clean, by praying to it, by making sure it's placed in a prominent place in our home or on a chain around our neck, we're hoping good things will come our way and bad things will be avoided. Well, Paul is sickened by this excuse for spirituality. Making up our own religion by taking bits and pieces of what we like and rejecting what we don't, is a pathetic excuse for the real thing. So, Paul sees an opportunity.

Among the plethora of gods he sees around, he notices one called "the unknown god." Paul sees here a way in, a way into another vision of God, another vision for faith and spirituality. And this brings me to the second point. Contrary to the smallness of God as an idol we create, control and manipulate, Paul proclaims the transcendence of God. God is the creative energy behind all that is, seen and unseen, a God who cannot be controlled, manipulated or boxed in with our limited thinking, imagining or believing. In Paul's words: "The God who made the world and everything in it... does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything. Since God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things..." God is infinite, vast, beyond anything we can conceive. We can only experience the transcendence of God indirectly. We can only experience the true

God known through the wonders of what God has made in the world around us, and through the wonders of our own bodies, minds and spirits too. The more we discover and the more we are moved by awe, gratitude and wonder at the mystery of what is, the more we are opening ourselves to the creator behind it all.

To imagine we can control such a reality is not only an illusion, but it points us in the wrong direction. True faith is about opening ourselves up to wonder, awe, reverence and thanksgiving. Rather than pigeonholing God or trying to control and manipulate God, we can pray to God to open us up to the beauty of the world, to a larger purpose, a deeper focus on what truly matters. We want to discover this and we want to be opened to this beyond the limitations and fears of our own imaginations and desires. Once we develop the right spirit, God can do things for us and God can open our eyes to see as God sees.

The experience of transcendence also reminds us how puny we are and yet how precious. Now that's a genuine spiritual experience. We are infinitely loved even though we are but mere specks of star dust in a vast universe. Do we know this deep in our souls? Idols we create are a major obstacle to this kind of spiritual experience. We are beloved despite the vastness and mystery all around us!

And this brings me to the final point. God is not only transcendence beyond anything I can manufacture through my own mind, imagination or hands. God is also closer to me and knows me better than I can ever know myself. In Paul's words: God is not far from each one of us. For "In God we live and move and have our being." We are a mystery to each other and even to ourselves. My prayer and worship is not only about opening me up to wonder, awe and gratitude before a beauty that continues to enlarge me, but also, to a deeper discovery of the purposes for which I was made in all the uniqueness and mystery of who I am. I wasn't made to serve base desires like beating my competitor, becoming more successful than my neighbour, being more attractive, powerful or financially prosperous. Such desires are distractions from deeper inner purpose. The more we find a deeper purpose the less these baser desires compel us.

The opening chapter of the bible (Genesis 1) tells us we were created out of love and for love. What does that mean for the world I am a part of? How can I serve divine love in how I live, how I relate and what I do? How do I discover the fullness of love within my depths, so that I am not driven by base self-serving desires of me, myself and I versus my neighbour that only leave me perpetually insecure, unsatisfied and anxious? I need to pray to God to take me deeper into myself. I need to pray to God to show me the way, to transform my heart ever more, to keep changing and growing my thinking. I need to pray to God to help me discover the particular gifts and talents in me I don't necessarily know are in me, so I can better serve divine love.

The transcendence of God and the imminence of God. God is greater than anything I can imagine and yet God is closer to me than my own breath. This is the God of true faith, true spirituality and true religion. This is the God revealed to Paul through the Spirit of the risen Christ. This is the God we need to worship and pray to.

So, what about you and me? Will we be like most of the Athenians who scoff at all this, are indifferent and just go our own way. Will we just want to hold on to our own idols because they serve our baser desires without questioning them, patting us on the back without challenging us? Or will we be like Dionysius the Areopagite, Damaris, and a few others who joined Paul in becoming true followers of Jesus?

Let us pray: Open us up to your transcendence, O God. Fill us with awe, wonder and gratitude as we take in the world around us... Fill us with a deeper sense of your closeness, that you are within us and all around us, calling to us in every breathe we take... Amen.