

FINDING GOD AGAIN

Acts 17: 16-34

Is faith in God something natural for us as humans? Or is faith in God a human invention?... Up to a few hundred years ago, everyone believed in God or some higher power. People in the past didn't agree about the nature of God or how God was active in the world. People didn't agree about religious doctrines and teachings either. But no one questioned whether there was some higher power, force or deity behind everything that existed in the world, a higher power that also exercised some influence in the world too.

But that all began to change a few hundred years ago. And that change started happening in Europe. It began in the universities and among the elite. Eventually it filtered down to the wider population so that today, hundreds of years later, the fastest growing group in North American society when it comes to religion is the group that claims they have no faith in God or in any kind of higher power. Some claim to be agnostic, meaning, they don't know or are not sure about all that. But the need to know about God or to have some kind of faith in something larger than yourself and your own ideas, aims and purposes... such a need for faith in something higher is just not there for a growing number of people. You can live your life, make your plans, and find your purpose and meaning without any reference to a higher power, presence or force in your life. Isn't that something?

So how did this come to be?

1. Well, first of all, the church has not helped. In Europe and the parts of the world Europe colonized, like North America, the church and its missionaries worked alongside the colonizing powers that be to convert various peoples and nations to Christianity. And the Christianity they were converting people to was very much about a culture and world view very European rather than the kind of Christianity that could be embraced and shaped in more indigenous ways. The church was not interested in engaging other peoples with a curiosity and openness to how God in Christ through the Spirit may be speaking through other peoples as much as through Europeans. This imperialistic Christianity which is also called "Christendom" has led to terrible reactions and all out rejection today. People have been wounded and harmed, and their whole indigenous identity has been wiped out by the church. The church has bullied, manipulated and spiritually colonized peoples all over the world in the service of nations seeking to conquer and enslave peoples, take their land and dig it up to extract its resources. It's a terrible legacy and many thoughtful people today want no part of it whatsoever.

2. Second, in order for the church to serve as a colonizing force, it also needed a theology that served this colonizing agenda. This meant that even though the church talked about a God of

love, it actually taught a very different kind of God. The church's God was primarily a God of judgement and condemnation, and the church taught that Jesus' suffering and death were caused by people's sin, especially people outside the church. God sees all and knows all, especially all that is worthy of judgement. God controls all that happens, including eternity. And eternity has no in-between heaven and hell. If you want to get to heaven and avoid hell, the church alone as God's representative on earth, holds the keys. And even though this theology served to make people feel guilty, ashamed and afraid for their eternal destiny, and even though such guilt, shame and fear helped the church stay in power, over time more and more people rejected such theology in the name of a freedom to be.

In order for a God of judgement to keep people afraid, guilty, ashamed and under control, it needs people to believe in such a God. One form of resistance and protest is to uncover such a God as a false god and idol. Secularism began as a freedom movement from the oppressive and colonizing theology of the church. We reject God because the only God we're taught is a God who condemns us and will only forgive us if the church says we're forgiven. To reject God is to be free to be yourself without being controlled.

And what about control itself? If God controls all that happens God is doing a terrible job given all the mayhem, chaos and suffering in the world. Who suffers the most in this world of ours? After a century of world wars and smaller wars, of genocides, atrocities and natural disasters, a movement arose among many in the western world called "protest atheism." We protest a concept of God in control because if God is responsible for what is happening in the world than God is cruel or else God is inept. Or, maybe, God is just a concept made up by the church to support its power and those in power to keep control. We protest such a God and we declare, in the philosopher Nietzsche's words: "God is dead!"

OK, so, is the only alternative to God no God, or is the problem here the kind of God we've been fed for 2000 years? Is the God of Christendom a false god and an idol, the kind of idol Protestant reformers like Martin Luther protested and the kind of idol the apostle Paul is distressed about in our scripture reading? Let's dive into our scripture reading to explore all this further.

1. First of all, Paul is in Athens, a city which is highly pluralistic spiritually speaking. There are Jews and gentiles devoted to the Jewish faith. There are others devoted to pagan spiritualities with various gods. And there are also those drawn by more philosophical religions like Epicureanism and Stoicism. Epicureans believe there is no God or gods, and are simply agnostic about it all. We believe what we see and what is here all around us. Life is here and the purpose of life is to live in the now, not go off into some imaginary dream world to escape life in the here and now. Stoics, on the other hand, believe in God as part of the whole world and every molecule of being. God is in all things and all things are in God and part of God. Paul finds some common ground in the Stoics when he quotes one of their poets: "In God we live and

move and have our being.” Even though this quote is one of the most popular quotes from scripture I hear in prayers and liturgies in churches today, I wonder how many people realize this is actually a quote from a Greek philosopher/poet in the mouth of Paul! Isn’t this amazing?

Anyhow, the first point here is that Paul is trying to be inclusive in what he’s saying. He wants to create an opening: to an unknown god. The approach that the church has failed to make for 2000 years is that it has never really been curious or open to what other faiths and philosophies have really taught. The church has never really pondered that perhaps God may be speaking through other faiths and peoples just as much as God may be speaking through us. And more, perhaps God wants to teach us about God’s nature and way of being in the world through other peoples and their faiths as much as we may have something to share with others of our faith.

And perhaps our Christianity and our understanding of Jesus is not the only way of being Christian, either. If Pentecost teaches us anything, it is that God speaks in the languages of all peoples, not just our language – indigenous languages and the languages of those the church has enslaved, Zulu, Swahili, Farsi, Arabic and Cree as much as the biblical languages Greek and Hebrew, and European languages like Latin, English, French and German. Language is also culture, is also identity, spirit and life. Imagine, God having a unique relationship with each person and each peoples, a unique calling to them and not just to me and you and us! Imagine...

2. OK, but our reading also tells us that for all Paul’s creative efforts to be open and curious, he is also distressed. Why? He is distressed at all the idols he sees in the temples and his message also includes a note of judgement. Now judgement is not just about condemnation. It is also about discernment of right from wrong, better from worse. Having good judgement and making a righteous judgement is about justice and truth, the defence of human dignity and the right to be against oppression and enslavement.

The gods Paul sees as idols represent those things humans create to rule, to enslave and to conquer. An idol is a human creation, manipulated and controlled. The God Paul argues for is a God not made with human hands who is above all, meaning God cannot be controlled or comprehended by one person or people alone. And even as God is above all, God is also in all, as Paul says: “In God we live and move and have our being” and we are all “God’s offspring.” In other words, God is above all and above anyone’s control, and at the same time God is to be found in all beings and all life which is a creation of God. Isn’t this a powerful counter and protest to all the ways we humans and the church in particular have tried to control God and control humans too? Paul is distressed at how we have created idols to worship because we have created them as an idol of ourselves in all our narcissistic arrogance and presumption of truth and right.

3. And so, finally, it is no surprise that Paul brings his sermon to a climactic finale with his call to “repent!” But repent for what? Well, to repent means to change. What do you and I need to change? What does the church need to change? What does our world need to change? If Paul was preaching to us here today and gave this exact sermon, and if he came to this finale proclaiming: “Repent!”, what change would that challenge us to make?

For some of us it may be repenting of the ways our privilege makes us blind to how we presume to know truth and right in relation to others. That includes us as persons and us as Christians and the church. We have much individually and collectively to repent of and change in relation to others. For others of us there is also the need to repent of the ways we have consented to victimization and allowed those with privilege and power to simply walk all over us, to commit injustice toward us and injustice toward others without sufficient protest on our part. No doubt, nobody chooses to be a victim. But the path to freedom for ourselves and then for those who oppress us and others is to struggle for a justice that has no place for control and domination.

The call to repent is a call to stand up for ourselves and others and to find ways to be agents of healing and transformation in faithfulness to Christ. How are you and I being called today to become the hands, feet, voice and heart of Jesus for ourselves and our neighbour near and far, human and non-human?

Thankfully, even as the church as Christendom has had a bloody history of colonization to atone for, there were protest movements from within at key moments of its history. Such movements and the people who participated in them often paid for their courage and faith with their lives. As Presbyterians, we were part of such protesting movements ourselves and many of our people, historically, paid for their courageous protest with their lives. Sadly, though, once we became established as the church in places like Europe, we aligned ourselves with the colonial project in our missionary approaches throughout the world. We became convinced that our way and our understanding of faith, truth and right was the one way. Hundreds of years later, we are discovering how wrong we were and how much suffering the church has been complicit in causing.

So then, the apostle’s call to repentance for us is a call to repent of how we have created an idol of God to serve our colonizing agenda, replacing a God who is above all, who has created all and who moves through all. Even as many in the world around us have given up on God and on finding God, may the God who has found us reveal God’s self to us anew in our believing, our repenting, our hoping and our loving. Amen.