

Sixth Sunday in Easter
Year A, RCL
May 17, 2020
North Fork Ministries
First Lesson:
Acts 17:22-31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For 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. 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, 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. 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, 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. 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.'

Since 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. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because 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."

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As reported in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we heard this morning, Paul said, "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, 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."

The truth in Paul's proclamation was readily apparent to me this most mornings this past week as I walked outside, just after daybreak, in the midst of God's creation, apart from shrines made by human hands, and instead was surrounded by sunshine and a gentle salty breeze carrying with it the breath of Spirit.

Paul's message to the Athenians wasn't one of those sermons about what we ought to do, or what it is that God wants us to do. It is, instead, an effort to understand the very nature of God. Paul makes reference to an altar in Athens, with the inscription, "To an unknown God" – erected by the people of Athens, in the midst of the pantheon of Gods they already worshiped, just in case they might have left one out. Indeed, Paul says that the times and boundaries of human creation exist "so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for

him and find him.” As unfathomable as God is, as much as we might recognize that we too worship “an unknown God,” we can’t avoid the quest; we seek some understanding of what God is about. We are all aspiring theologians.

You may be familiar with the modern mystic, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. Rabbi Kushner is a student and scholar in the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah – a tradition concerned with “the inner life of God.” Within Kabbalah there is the notion of Ein Sof – the Divine spark, the source of all that was and is and will be. As Kushner says, “Everything in the world is made of *Ein Sof*. Everything in the world is the wave of which the *Ein Sof*, or God, is the ocean. And our knowledge of the ocean is largely based on the way it manifests itself in the waves.”

The metaphorical idea of God as the limitless ocean and our narrow conception of God limited to the waves rising and falling on the surface of the ocean, isn’t such an abstract concept for those of us here who are blessed to live surrounded by a salty sea.

With Peconic Bay and the Long Island Sound at our doorstep, it may be easier for us to understand how God can’t be contained, how God can’t be defined or limited by our human imagination.

But even here we can only speak of God metaphorically. Rabbi Kushner says that there are two ways of thinking about God. The first is the more hierarchical, traditional view that has dominated religious thinking throughout most of human history. Imagine a very large circle. This very large circle represents God. And then imagine a very small circle. And this smaller circle, placed just below the larger circle, is you. God is up there. We are down here. We are separate from God. We ask God for things. God tells us what to do. We may or may not listen. It’s the old idea of God with a long beard, sitting on a throne, somewhere in the heavens.

But there is a different way of thinking about God without the hierarchy. Imagine that the small circle that represents you no longer rests outside of and below the larger circle of God. Instead, imagine that the small circle has moved inside the larger circle, so that all that is you, and all that is me, is contained within all that is God. This is a notion of God that is common among Eastern religions. It is a largely Buddhist conception of God, but is a part of Western, of Christian ideas of God, as well. It is an idea contained in the Apostle Paul’s description of God we heard earlier, “In him we live and move and have our being.” Or in the theologian Paul Tillich’s famous conception of God as “the ground of our being.”

But let’s carry the metaphor of the smaller circle within the larger circle one step further. Within that model the goal is not simply to pray to God or to listen to God’s instructions from afar, but to come to the realization that you have been a part of God all along. To realize that our separateness from God is only an illusion. We are part of all that is divine. It is in that realization that the lines

defining you as a smaller circle within the larger circle of God begin to blur and disappear. It is no longer clear where you end and where God begins. That is the mystical moment, the moment where we realize that we are all one.

We are all mystics, we just don't know it. We can't make those mystical moments happen, but we can be open to them. And those mystical moments, when we realize that we are at one with God and with all creation, aren't limited to mountaintop experiences. Mystery is the stuff of everyday life, if we simply open our eyes.

It is one of my great privileges as your priest to be able to offer God's blessing to the children too young to receive communion who come forward in their parent's arms.

Not long ago, before the Season of Corona, I placed my hand atop the head of a small boy and proceeded to make the sign of the cross on his forehead, asking for God's blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The child reached up and with both of his tiny little hands, pressed my outstretched hand down upon his head and refused to let go.

Immediately I thought of Jacob, wrestling on the desert floor with the angel of God until daybreak and demanding, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

It was one of those moments when the lines of the circle defining the boundary between what was me and what was God dissolved. The line that separates us from the God within whom we live and move and have our being is a boundary of our own creation. In reality, we are one with the Divine. May the hidden unity of all that is be revealed to us this day.