

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year A

Our readings today present us with consolation and reassurance, but also with a challenge.

To get the full impact of our first reading from Acts, we need to back up in the story a bit. Paul and Silas were in Greece and had been in Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of their fellow Jews. We are told that Paul went to the synagogue on three sabbaths and argued with them from the scriptures about Jesus. Some folks came to believe – even some of the Greeks and women, we’re told. But others became jealous and caused an uproar. They went searching for Paul and Silas and attacked some of their friends, so others shuffled Paul and Silas off to Beroea – where Paul continued to preach about Jesus, finding more believers. When the people from Thessalonica heard that Paul was in Beroea preaching, they went after him there. And so Paul got shuffled off again, this time by himself. Friends took him as far as Athens, where he was going to wait for Silas and Timothy to join him. Of course, Paul couldn’t just lay low. He went wandering around the city, and was “deeply disturbed to see that the city was full of idols.” So he went to the synagogue and argued with his fellow Jews there, and even got into debates with the Greek Philosophers – the Epicureans and Stoics. We are told that some of these philosophers said about Paul, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities,” which would have been against the law. The verses immediately proceeding the passage we heard today are these:

“So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.”

The Areopagus, where they brought Paul, was a low hill northwest of the Acropolis, but was also the site of the Council or Court. So in some ways, you could think of it as Paul being called in as a witness in a Senate Hearing!

What we heard today, then, was Paul’s testimony. He had spent some time walking around Athens – but what he chose to focus on was not all the idol worship that disturbed him. No, he found common ground. He saw, in all the religiosity of the city – even that which he did not like personally – the *desire for God* that was present. He picked up on that altar inscription “to an unknown God” – and used that as a point of entry to talk about what they had in common. He quoted wisdom from Greek poets

that contained truths they could *all* agree to: “In him we live and move and have our being,” and “We, too, are his offspring...” Of course, the “him” to which the Greek poets were referring was most likely Zeus, but their understanding of *a* God in whom we all live and move and have our being gave Paul the way to talk about THE God – as the one who revealed Godself in Jesus. This God, who – as Paul said - does not live in shrines made by human hands, made all of us that we might “search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.”

We are God’s offspring. We live and move and have our very being in God, who is not far from each of us. Those are very reassuring and consoling words. They speak a truth we need to hear these days, when we might be asking – in the midst of this pandemic and all the division it seems to be causing – where *is* God. God is *not* far off. We live and move and have our very being *in God*.

Those words speak a truth that comes from the Gospel. There we heard Jesus say, “You know the Spirit of truth, because he *abides* with you, and he *will be in you*.” “You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” --

We sang that same truth in our opening hymn: “Be thou my wisdom and thou my true word; I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord; thou my great Father; thine own may I be; thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.”

Those words are both a prayer we make – and a profession of faith. They are simultaneously comforting – and challenging. Because Jesus says to us, “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.” And the only commandment he has given here in John’s gospel is this: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another... Love one another, as I have loved you.”

Communities of faith – all over the world – are struggling these days, not able to worship together in our sacred spaces. But as Paul reminded us, “This God, who does not live in shrines made by human hands, made all of us that we might “search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” Our seeking and groping for God just may be leading us to look in the right places – in the ways we find to love one another, to *see* God present in one another, and to *be* that presence of God for one another.

Where is God? Not far. Not far at all. Right here present. It is both a prayer and a challenge – as is the hymn we will close with today:

**God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;**

That is but another way of saying what Teresa of Avila spoke:
“Christ has no body now but ours...”

If we want God to help our neighbors or the sick or the unemployed, or somehow heal our sick society and our hateful divisions, let us step up and own those pesky baptismal promises. Let us pray, as a petition but also as a thanksgiving for what is:

God be in my head, and in my eyes, in my mouth and in my heart.

May it be so.

- [Acts 17:22-31](#)
- [1 Peter 3:13-22](#)
- [John 14:15-21](#)
- [Psalm 66:7-18](#)