

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
May 14, 2023  
Acts 17: 22-31  
God's Offspring

Last week we heard from the apostle Peter. This week we hear from the apostle Paul. Scholars often divide Paul's travels into three journeys. The first was to Cyprus and portions of what was known as Asia Minor, now known as Turkey. In this journey, Paul often wrote about the struggles of welcoming non-Jewish believers of Christ into the fold, how to handle the issues of circumcision and dietary laws. The second and third set of travels occur after these issues have been settled by the Council in Jerusalem. Gentiles - that is non-Jews - are welcome into the fold. Paul now addresses how to be a follower of Christ while living in a world where the person and work of Jesus Christ is barely known, if known at all. This is where we find ourselves this morning, as Paul is on his second journey, introducing the people of Asia Minor and Greece to the Christ, a different kind of God and king.

Before we delve into looking at what Paul says in Athens, it may be helpful to see where Paul has been. On his first journey, Paul travels with Barnabas and John Mark (thought to be the Gospel writer Mark). They have a falling out, and Paul begins his second journey traveling with Silas and Timothy. They begin in Syria, travel through a number of cities in Galatia, in Asia Minor, before Paul has a vision that causes Paul to cross over to Macedonia - Greece. This is the first documented preaching in Europe. Once in Greece, Paul preaches and founds the church in Philippi, and then heads to Thessalonica and Berea. Yet not all is hunky dory for Paul. He encounters significant challenges from some of the Jewish leaders as he is sharing the message of Christ, so much so that friends whisked him away to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy behind.

You can imagine the scene from an "on the road" buddy film - maybe a little "Butch Cassidy" mixed with "Thelma and Louise." Paul is hanging out in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive, and scripture tells us he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So every day he argued in the synagogue and also in the marketplace. Various philosophers debated with him, some calling him a pretentious babbler and accusing him of proclaiming foreign divinities. These philosophers brought him to the Areopagus. This is an elevated rock outcropping near the Acropolis in Athens. It was the location that the governing council tried cases of homicide and assault, as well as cases involving religious matters. Its name comes from the Greek - Hill of Ares - because the war God Ares was tried at this location for the murder of Poseidon's son. These philosophers were curious about Paul's teaching, wanting to know more, saying "It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." (Acts 17:20). This is where we pick up Paul's discourse to the people of Athens, in Acts 17 beginning at verse 22. Hear now the Word of God:

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual 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 God made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and God 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 fumble about 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.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

So there is Paul, standing on outcropping of rocks overlooking Athens, with all manners of people listening intently. While Rome may have been the seat of imperial power at this time, and Corinth the political and commercial capital of the region we now know of as Greece, Athens was the center of Western art, philosophy and culture. And Paul meets the people where they are. We might say today that Paul understood his context, starting off by acknowledging the myriad of gods the Athenians worshipped. In my eye, I see him grinning a bit – maybe even a touch of a smirk, as he sees the irony in his opening statement, but not sure the Athenians will get it: “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual 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.’”

And then Paul cuts to the chase – let me tell you about this unknown god. This God may be unknown to you, but I know God intimately and God knows me intimately, for “In God we live and move and have our being.” As Paul looks out over the city of Athens, filled with temples made to many gods, he tells the people that the God of whom he speaks does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor does God need things made by human hands. Paul is actually pretty blunt saying, we ought not to think that the God is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. I can almost see the look of bewilderment on the faces of the Athenians as their eyes rest on the marble statues surrounding them. These images formed by the art and imagination of mortals were their pride, their source of inspiration, their medium of worship of the divine.

Instead Paul tells them that the God of whom he speaks is the creator of all – Lord of heaven and earth. God created all peoples to inhabit the earth. And Paul makes an even more brazen statement. We are God’s offspring. This statement must have shaken the Athenians to the core, for Paul is quoting one of their own poets. In the opening invocation to Zeus, the chief deity of the Greek pantheon, the poet Aratus in *Phaenomena* says,

Let us begin with Zeus, whom *we* mortals never leave unspoken.

For every street, every market-place is full of Zeus.

Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity.

Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus.

For we are indeed his offspring... (*Phaenomena* 1-5).<sup>1</sup>

Paul is challenging the Greeks to change their understanding of God, from one of statues which fill the streets and marketplaces to a God in which *we live and move and have our being*. This is not a God who is way up there in the heavens or way out there in the universe. This is not a God who pops in for a visit every now and again. As one commentator has noted, “God isn’t remote, but rather is actually, intimately present everywhere, such that *it’s we who are “inside” God*, saturated with God through and through — and at the same time utterly dependent on God, not just for daily bread, but also for our ongoing life and movement and being itself. In short, for Paul, we are creatures in symbiotic communion with God.”<sup>2</sup> As Paul himself says in verse 27, “God is not far from each one of us. We are God’s offspring.”

I find Paul’s words particularly striking on the day we in our society lift up mothers and mother influences. Paul would probably be as baffled by our cultural celebrations of Mother’s Day as the Athenians were baffled by his words about a God who doesn’t need a house made by human hands. Paul is arguing our primary identity is in God – we are defined as the offspring of the Creator of all. And like a mother hen who knows her brood, God knows us. God is already with us, already present. We are beloved children of God. Paul is making a relational claim, a claim that went against the established order.

In a daily devotional this week, Father Richard Rohr speaks to this claim saying,

“The import of Jesus’ teaching and almost all his healing was a rearranging of social relationships and therefore of social order. He could not have gone around eating with the underclass, touching the untouchables, healing on the Sabbath, and collaborating with upstarts like John the Baptist down at the river without turning traditional societies upside down.

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<sup>1</sup> Riemer Faber. The Apostle and the Poet: Paul and Aratus. *Clarion* Vol. 42, No. 13 (1993); available online at <https://spindleworks.com/library/rfaber/aratus.htm>

<sup>2</sup> SALT Commentary for Easter 6 (Year A): John 14:15-21 and Acts 17:22-31; <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/9/called-alongside-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-6>

Jesus refuses to abide by the honor/shame system that dominated the Mediterranean culture of his time. ... For Jesus to walk into the midst of that cultural system and say, “Do not retaliate” and “Love your enemies” was to subvert the whole honor/shame system itself. Once challenged, Jesus’ listeners were given a new place to find their identity: not in their social positions of honor or shame but in God. *Who we are in God is who we are.* ...

Our value no longer depends upon whether our family or village likes us, or whether we’re good-looking, wealthy, or obedient to the laws. Jesus’ message is incredibly subversive in any honor/shame society. As he takes away old foundations, he offers a new, more solid one: neither shame-based nor guilt-based but based in who we are in God.

Who we are in God is a beloved child. Our identity is no longer dependent on the estimation of our culture or even on our own estimation of ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Who we are in God is a beloved child. What a powerful statement to make on any given day, but I think especially meaningful on Mother’s Day when we celebrate a defining identity statement. Whether you have a relationship with a mother figure through the bonds of biology or mutuality, and whether you are a mother figure through the bonds of biology or mutuality, seeing these relationships through the lens of who we are in God – God’s offspring- matters.

It matters because we can celebrate the ways in which the nurture and sacrifice, the hand-holding and the letting go, the encouragement and the challenge have shaped each one of us, such that “our identity is no longer dependent on the estimation of our culture or even on our own estimation of ourselves.”

Recognizing that who we are in God is a beloved child matters because it allows us to reject the either/or thinking of honor vs. shame. It matters because it can redeem painful episodes from the past. And it can lead to reconciliation of broken relationships. Who we are in God is a beloved child. Our value no longer depends upon whether our family or village likes us, or whether we’re good-looking, wealthy, or obedient to the laws.

We are God’s offspring. And while we may resemble our parents physically and share many of their mannerisms, we are also called to resemble our parent God. Much as we trust a parent to hold our hand as we cross the street when we are young, as God’s offspring we are called to trust in God our parent as the source of light and life and love. Paul began his speech in front of the Areopagus saying, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way.” Paul ends his speech to the Athenians by challenging the proposition of what it means to be spiritual. It is not to worship an idol, a god made from stone, and god who lives

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr. Upending the Social Order. May 8, 2023 Daily Devotion. Available online at <https://email.cac.org/t/d-e-zujdrll-tujkluukij-s/>

in a house made by human hands. Rather, it is to worship a living God. The living God. To be the offspring of a living God. God has given assurance to all by raising the one who will be our judge, that is Jesus Christ, from the dead. That is what we celebrate in this season of Eastertide. The assurance of the resurrection – the assurance that death is not the last word. The assurance that “in God we live and move and have our being.” That friends is something to celebrate today and every day. Amen.

The words of the *Brief Statement of Faith* affirm the common heritage of all people as beloved children of God, as God’s offspring. I invite you to join me, as we affirm this belief together.