

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

ARE YOU RELIGIOUS?

A sermon preached on April 27, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Acts 17:22-31 [NRSV] Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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, ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ From one ancestor¹ 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, ²⁷ so that they would search for God¹ and perhaps grope for him and find him -- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ 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."

Are you religious? That may seem like a stupid question to ask people sitting in church on a Sunday morning listening to a sermon, singing hymns, taking part in liturgy. But, of course, the answer begs the question, "What do you mean by *religious*?" We could start with the etymology of the word. *Religion* shares a common root with *ligament*, meaning *to bind together*. Like our bodies' connecting bands of muscle to bone, religion seeks to bind our human experience with God, and in this last phrase the key word is *seek*, for Paul certainly had it right when he said to the Athenians, "...so that they would *search* for God and perhaps *groped* for him and find him..."

A classic and light-hearted description of theology is that it is like being blindfolded in a dark room trying to catch a black cat – upon which the atheist adds "and there is no cat." It might sound strange to us that scripture talks about seeking and groping for God. This makes religion sound like a journey, while so many of the louder voices today speak of religion as though it were an arrival. Groping for God suggests we don't always know what we're doing or exactly what we're looking for, while the louder voices of our day presume it's all a settled matter.

The Apostle Paul, surely the New Testament's most assertive of evangelists for Christ, even employs the word *perhaps* in speaking of the search for God, indicating

the real possibility that God might be elusive, but so much of today's speech about God assures us that the hunt is over, God has been snared, caged, and domesticated – my fellow Americans (our politicians tell us), we're happy to report that God is alive and well and living in Washington and approves of everything we choose to do. But here's Paul reminding us that if nominated God will not run, if elected God will not serve us and our narrow sectarian, economic, social, or political interests, despite what some forms of religion might suggest.

Were the Athenians religious? Paul doesn't even bother to ask. He simply assumes the fact based on the presence of shrines populating all quarters of the city. The Greeks were religious to the *-enth* degree. There were shrines to Zeus and Hermes, Aphrodite and Apollo, Artemis and Posiedon – the whole Olympian clan was there, plus a shrine erected *To an unknown god*. The Athenians, knowing that their godlings could be real pesky if irritated, covered all exigencies, for nothing could irritate a god more than being ignored. Our version of covering all exigencies is declaring God fully known and scrupulously defined and packaged in various ways by over four hundred distinct denominations in America. Grope for God? Hardly! He's available shrink-wrapped and available in a variety of colors and styles, extended limited warranties available.

How did we get to this point where God is a commodity peddled to believers? How did we get to the point where the Lord of the Universe has become our house pet? How did Christianity become understood as an endorser of Americanism and Islam the endorser of Arab culture? But, of course, religion is always a creature of the culture within which it thrives, because the human heart is always trying to make the unknown known and untamed controllable. Is it any wonder, really, that religion – rather than a means of searching within the mystery – becomes the means of controlling the mystery? As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, Christians "...turned the faith of Jesus into the religion about Jesus and the rest is history. In a quip that makes the rounds, Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom, but it was the church that came."

It is dismaying to see how in our time talk about God has settled into presumed and fixed assumptions. I am convinced that human certitude serves God ill, constricts the practice of faith, and limits the ability of the people of God to creatively love and serve. The Athenians may have been in a better spiritual place than we, for at least they acknowledged dimensions of transcendence that remained unknown. They didn't pretend to be know-it-alls in the realm of the spiritual, but give today's churches an opportunity to speak out on some matter of vital importance and we are given to know the final word on the matter, whether it's a pronouncement from Rome or a proof-texting quotation from scripture. How uncomfortable we are with mystery! How anxious and fearful we are, and how little we are willing to trust the free flowing spirit of God, that we are driven to pretend that our frail, tentative answers rise to the level of eternal truths.

Cultural critic Antonio Monda held conversations with a series of well-known people and recently published them in *Do You Believe? Conversations on God and Religion*. Saul Bellow, the great American novelist who died in '05, was one of his conversation partners. But when Monda asked how he imagined God, Bellow said, "I don't want to talk about that. I'm afraid of banality, and I think (God is) a subject

whose importance is diminished by conversation.”

May his race increase! Among those who consider themselves religious, so many are guilty of making the holiness of God and the preciousness of faith crude banalities, rendering sublime matters of the spirit as flat as last week's champagne. It is such a great temptation among religious folk to palliate their fears and fantasies by shaping them into idols and imagining they have now defined God. What is created is an image of God Almighty so self-serving, cramped and simplistic that it's clear to anyone that such a God could never have managed to ignite a bush or called a son, much less create a universe of vast complexity. As Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, once said, “As the universe grew great, I dreamt for it a greater God.” Religion is a human creature, and as our human experience deepens and broadens, so must our understanding of God through faith be expressed.

If our faith is defined by the limits of ourselves, God becomes a projection of the littleness of our lives instead of our lives growing and reaching for the dimensions of God. For some who would consider themselves religious, faith has relatively little to do with a Living Presence who calls them to exciting and newly discovered dimensions of life and hope, but lamentably returns them again and again to cramped rigidities about who is righteous and who is not, who is acceptable and who is not, what is sinful and what is not. It is what leads John DeGruchy to comment that, “Bad religion is infinitely worse than no religion at all,” and reminds us that “the moment you think you have grasped who God is, that cannot possibly be God, for God is precisely ‘a being than which nothing greater’ can be thought or imagined.” It was back in the late 1930s and early 40s that Dietrich Bonhoeffer speculated about a “religionless Christianity” – a manner of faith that rejected the individualistic, ego-centric and inward-looking religion that remains fixed on a metaphysical view of the world that has been discredited by science and resulted in a church that was incapable of confronting Nazism, standing with the Jews, and bearing the courage of Christ.

Rather than asking if someone is a religious person, it is far better to wonder if we are loving persons. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism are all religions. Fundamentalist Mormons and their multiple adolescent wives are religious. Anyone can choose to wear a cross on a chain or in a lapel pin. Regular attendance at worship takes little more than a couple of hours a week. What is significant is not the means of prayer or the style of worship or the shape of shrines. What matters is whether we love with Christ's love. What matters is the difference that love makes in us and in the world. “By their fruits you will know them,” Jesus said referring to the love his followers would show, the healing they would bring, the peace they would build.

Nowhere in scripture does Jesus say to someone “your religious practice has saved you.” There's no interrogation about what church they attend or whether they can recite the right doctrine. The critical religious questions are not about what scripture passages prove your point or what worship styles appeal to your character or what doctrines you recite, but how we love. “I love the recklessness of faith,” William Sloane Coffin wrote. “First you leap, and then you grow wings.” “Too many religious people make faith their aim,” he writes. “They think ‘the greatest of these’ is faith, and faith defined as an infallible doctrine. These are the dogmatic, divisive

Christians, more concerned with freezing the doctrine than warming the heart. If faith can be exclusive, love can only be inclusive.”

I recently heard someone referred to as “a good Christian.” Unfortunately, there are other kinds, and I guess we all take our turns proving that. The essence of the gospel remains, however. We are not called to be religious, but to love. We are not called to always be right, but to love. We are not called to be shaped by the fear and anxieties of others who cope with the tumult of our times by withdrawing into self-righteousness. We are called to love as Jesus loved, to act upon the grace of God that we have been given and to trust that God will continue to encounter us and call to us in the mysterious future, and finally to trust that any other way of living is idolatry and uselessness.