

“Groping For God”

Acts 17:16-32

In the reading, the apostle Paul is in Athens, the centre of scholarship and learning in the Mediterranean world. While there, Paul seeks to find a way to relate the message of Jesus to the Greeks and does so when he discovers an altar “To an unknown god.” Paul shifts the focus of how God is understood away from things that can be seen to things that are unseen. A reading from Acts, Chapter 17, verses 16-32:

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place² every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?’ ²⁰It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ ²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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. ²⁴The 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, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor³ 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, ²⁷so that they would search for God⁴ and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For “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.”

²⁹Since 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. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because 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.’

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’

This past week I had the opportunity to listen in on an interview with a professional “futurist.”

Futurists are individuals who study certain forces and conditions in order to make some sense of where society on a whole might be headed over the long term. Futurists don’t just look at the immediate future, like the next five years, futurists are considering what they see unfolding over much greater time spans. And just in case you’re wondering, this futurist being interviewed wasn’t wearing a cape and using a crystal ball either.

No, this futurist was being interviewed by the Business News Network to offer his take on what the coming years would bring and what impact these trends might have on the world of commerce. I have to say that this fellow’s outlook was pretty grim. He talked about how the rising levels of debt and deficit spending by western nations have created a standard of living that we can no longer afford. He went on to talk about how people were going to have to change the way they live...and learn to live with less. When he was asked what the most important thing would be for people affected by this change he referred to something he called a “life code.” When I heard this term “life code” my ears perked up. Because you see, by “life code” this

fellow was referring to the set of rules or the belief system or value system by which an individual attempts to govern himself or herself. "Life code" was just another way of referring to one's philosophy or religion.

"Life codes" are nothing new, there have been all sorts of belief structures, cultural value systems and philosophies that have come and gone through the ages. The ancient Greek city of Athens where we encounter the apostle Paul in this reading from the Book of Acts today was a city that had a variety of "life codes" to choose from. The city of Athens was the centre of learning in the ancient Greco-Roman world. It was common for individuals, mostly men, to gather in the Agora, or marketplace, to debate the virtues of their particular life codes.

Our reading this morning refers to two particular life code schools that debated with Paul -the Stoics and the Epicureans. Stoicism was a "way of life" founded about 400 years earlier by a Greek philosopher named Zeno. The Stoics were strict rationalists who believed that self-control and control over one's emotions were the keys to happiness. Unlike a lot of other Greeks, the Stoics did not believe in the pantheon of gods, instead they believed in one all encompassing God that sought to draw all things together in him.

The Epicureans on the other hand were around about as long as the Stoics. Based on the teachings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, they preached that one needed modesty and asceticism in order to be free from the fear and suffering of the world. Like Stoicism, the Epicureans sought to offer a clear alternative to some of the materialism that permeated the Greek world and there was a lot of it. Scholars estimate there were probably three idols for every person in Athens at that time. Those manifestations of wealth made from wood or silver or gold that expressed what people valued. Yet, even though their message was different from the materialism of the age, Stoicism and Epicureanism were still clear-cut philosophies. As a result, the Stoics and the Epicureans believed that they had it all figured out, that they had all the answers that were necessary for living. That's probably why they referred to Paul as being nothing more than a "babbler" as the text says. If they had it all figured out then all Paul would have to offer would be nothing but nonsense.

That can happen all the time can't it? Ever been in one of those situations where you know you've got something all figured out and then someone comes along to give you their take on it? They start going on and on about how they would do it, and well, you just don't listen because as far as you're concerned this person doesn't know what they are talking about, they are just babbling. As far as you're concerned you have all the answers. You know what you need to do and aren't in the mood to believe someone else might know better or offer something that might be helpful.

This word "babble" comes from the Greek "babaros" which is the word from which we get our word barbarian, but it also was used to refer to non-Greek speakers. You see, as far as the Stoics and the

Epicureans were concerned, Paul wasn't speaking the same language as them. He was coming at them with a "foreign divinity"...a different kind of life code.

There are still plenty of life codes to choose from in this world of ours aren't there? -although we don't congregate in the Agora (the ancient Athenian marketplace) to learn about them. Instead, we get our "life codes" from places like television and the internet, which really have become "marketplaces" in their own right. If you look at all of the new channels that have been created in our digital age, how many of these channels are what we would refer to as "lifestyle" channels? These are channels that have been developed to encourage people to live a certain way and to value certain behaviours. They can even help to teach you a whole new language about things like, travel or food or sports or fame any number of things. Everything you need for the "gear head," "the golf-nut" and the "foodie!" All I know is give me an hour of the Food Network and I'll have a list of places I need to go eat, some specialty items I need to buy for a new recipe and a must have gadget for my kitchen.

And it's not just television channels where this is evident either is it? I find it fascinating when I go to the bookstore and look at the hundreds of magazines many that seek to encourage these different lifestyles. They help to develop markets for products and industries where we are encouraged to invest our money and our passion. And then of course there are smart phone apps. I've got a few on my phone that I use with regularity. I wonder how many people's "life code" these days is influenced by some of the apps on their smart phone? Because not unlike the ancient city of Athens where people had their idols of silver and wood and gold. We too have the stuff we clutch on to or grab hold of because we believe that somehow, by possessing these things we will have a better life. -That somehow life might be just a little more divine.

But maybe there is that which we haven't quite grasped yet...something that has escaped our clutches and remains unknown to us. And that is what Paul is getting at as he makes his way to the altar of the "unknown God." That just maybe there is something about our life code that we haven't fully taken into account. That there is something else in this life beyond the stuff that makes up the day to day clutch and grab...grab and go lifestyle. Paul refers to the God we might grope for...in the Greek it means the God we might "feel around" for or "touch."

For Paul the message is clear. Although we spend our lives in a material world and are afforded the opportunity to embrace these things, we must never forget the value of those with whom we bear the creator's image. When our "stuff" becomes an impediment to genuine relationships with others then we are in trouble. Beyond the projects, the programs and the products there are people on all sides. For Paul, this is what God affirms in Jesus, it's the value of human relationship above all things, this is the "life code" for

followers of Jesus. Unlike many who see judgment day as the end, if we pay attention to Scripture, God's judgement is one that always allows for life to take hold again. God's judgment isn't a negative, in Jesus it's an affirmation of the "life" we get to have. It's about the relationship God seeks to have with us and the relationship God desires us to have as human beings with one another.

And this is the beauty of why we celebrate such a thing as infant baptism. To baptize a young child is to affirm exactly what we believe God has pronounced in Jesus. That life in its fullest most complete expression is lived in a relationship with God -this is hopefully what we seek to embody as a church. That through the waters of Christ's baptism God has mysteriously reached out to each of us, groped for us. In the water of our baptism God touches us and we are to behold the value of one another at a deeper level. We receive this kinship of where the unknown God is made known in the human form of each one of us. The rest of our lives become a lived response, where we reach out to others to discover that same presence.

A few months ago I had a conversation with a new Mom, who didn't have her first child until she was almost forty. As we spoke she was telling me what a profoundly life-changing experience it was to have a child of her own. While standing there holding her child she said "You know, I went through life a lot of years and thought I had a pretty good sense of what was important. That was until my child was born. She said now I know what it means to have something in your life you would be willing to jump in front of a bus to save."

The more I thought about what she said, the more I realized that was a great way to understand this is what God does in Jesus. God has jumped right into the midst of this world to declare the value of people. Because ultimately the "life code" of God *isn't a code* but a person, the in whom says Paul "we live and move and have our being," who is the Holy Presence we are to behold in one another.

Thanks be to God.