

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Easter 6A 2017

Acts 17: 22-31

We have some great readings this morning but I'm particularly drawn to the first one from Acts. It's the Apostle Paul sharing the Gospel with the Greek intellectual elite, and I love the way he starts. "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way."

There's no condemnation. There's no shoving the faith down their throats. Paul starts by finding common ground--by valuing what he sees in the people of Athens. He notices how *religious* they are.

I started thinking about that word, "religious" and what it actually means and how the feeling around that word has changed so much in my lifetime. Just think about it: If somebody comments on how religious you are, it doesn't necessarily feel like a compliment. Depending on who's saying it, it could be a way of describing you as irrational, unthinking, someone who spends time focused on something they can't see instead of enjoying Sunday brunch. Labeling you religious could be a way of saying you're naive and foolish, at best, and judgmental and hate-filled, at worst.

As fewer people actively participate in an organized religion, those who do, appear somewhat abnormal. "I'm spiritual but not religious," is something many people would say. Being religious gets pitted against being spiritual--as if you couldn't be both.

So, today, I am really appreciating this speech that Paul makes to the Greek intellectuals--to the people who are interested in new ideas. Paul finds ways to speak to them that are relevant. He does exactly what we heard in the second reading today. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." Paul does just that--and he does it in such a way that still speaks truth to us.

When Paul uses the word "religious", he's basically talking about worship. Bowing down before a god. Personal devotion. It's only in modern times, that religion has gotten that broader definition of having a set of shared beliefs and doctrines, a way of organizing, scriptures, liturgies and rituals.

Some people see all this structure as getting in the way. Some people have been hurt by these structures--by the church--they've been told they don't fit, that there's something wrong with the way they are or the way they think. The structure can be confining and restricting. So rigid as to squeeze the life out of a person. So constricting that you can't breathe--that you can't feel the Spirit.

Religion seems like a bunch of rules about what you must believe and what you should and should not do. Spirituality is individual; not controlled by others. It is an experience of freedom and following your own path.

When I was in seminary, I had a wonderful class called "African-American Spirituality". It was taught by an amazing woman, Cheryl Saunders, who was a pastor, a mother of young children, a professor and somehow still found time to write books. She helped me understand the word "religion" in a whole new way. The root is "ligare" which means "to bind or connect". We can see that same root in ligament--something which connects a bone to another bone. So "religion" is "re-ligare"--reconnecting.

It is so different to think about religion this way. It's not what constricts us; it's what holds us together.

What we are doing right now--coming together for worship--is at the center of being religious. It's how we practice our religion. I hear people describe why worship is important to them in various ways--including it being a reset--a time to get refueled--a time to reorient and reconnect with God and the people in this community, and increasingly, as hate seems to grow around us, worship is a place to be surrounded by love.

For me, *leading* worship is my job, my calling--but *worship* is what holds me together. I have actually gone to church ever since I was old enough to go on my own, rarely missing a Sunday. I even went to church in college--which is the time when most people take a break. My main church community was the University Church but I often went to the Roman Catholic folk mass and Quaker Meeting, as well. I loved them all, in different ways.

Truth be told, I partied as much as anyone at my college--which was ranked the number one party school in the country when I was there. So, going to church--being religious-- had nothing to do with me making better choices or being morally better than anyone else.

That was a hard time in my life. I was deeply grieving my father who had died during my senior year of high school. And I was doing that hard work that all young adults do of trying to figure out who I was. Suffice it to say, that I did not feel very grounded on the best of days, and on the worst, I felt like I was falling apart. Church was what put me back together again--and what held me together.

Spirituality is about a personal experience of the Holy, of God. It's a vital part of our faith lives, and it's what Jesus promises in his words this morning. "I will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth. . . You know [the Spirit] because the Spirit abides with you and is in you. . . I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."

Experiencing--feeling, knowing--the Spirit of God's presence is an amazing thing, and I am thankful every time it happens to me. But those experiences are not enough. We also need the framework, the container, the structure of the Christian religion.

When I am struggling, I need something that is outside of me, something that does not depend on my feelings or experience. I need the proclamation of faith that we all give by just being here whether we are feeling it or not. Luther says we can't get here on our own but we are gathered by the Holy Spirit. So, each of us being here today is a witness to the power of that Spirit.

When we are struggling--and even when we are not--we need the Word of God that comes to us through Scripture, and hopefully through the Word that is preached. Yes, we wrestle with Scripture. Yes, there are Scriptures that speak God's truth more clearly than others--and there are Scriptures that are downright confusing.

Today, these words of Paul to the Athenians speak with so much clarity about who God is. Let's take them in.

God is the One who made everything.

God is the One who gives us breath.

God is the One who made all nations from one ancestor.

I just want to pause for a moment on that one. The King James Version says "from one blood." This verse was cited over and over again by abolitionist preachers who were opposing slavery--and the segregation that followed. All people are created equal by God--we all come from the same place and have the same value. That is part of our religion--a holy

word that comes to us from Scripture. A Word that challenges other words that say that some lives matter more than others.

Paul has these words about God and our searching: "So that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though he is not far from each one of us. For 'in him we live and move and have our being.'"

Being religious is about searching for God. It's about questions and yearnings. As Christians, it's about knowing that God is near, even that God is in us but that God is also much greater than we are. That we can know God but not know all of God.

In the very last sentence, Paul comes to Jesus--though he doesn't name him. As Christians, Jesus is the framework. He's the one who shows us most clearly who God is and who we are in relationship to God. Every time we celebrate Communion, we hear those words that many of us know by heart. "This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you--and for all people--for the forgiveness of sins."

These words of Jesus take us back to the most sacred of our stories. They reconnect us like ligaments do, to the Body of Christ--to Jesus and the way he lived--to his unwillingness to turn away from love, even dying for that love.

And no matter how we came here this morning, no matter if we came in angry and distant or ashamed of how we've hurt others or fallen short in helping them--no matter how we come today, these words of forgiveness come to us--even if we've never said we're sorry.

And for those of us who are grieving--who are missing those we love--in this Holy Communion, we are reconnected to all those we love--in heaven and wherever they are on earth.

Finally, at the end of our worship, we are sent back out into the world--to love as the Body of Christ--broken, not whole--but held together.

So, today, may we be thankful for the One who holds us and all things together--now and always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.