

"Groping for God"

Acts 17:22-31 & John 14:15-21

April 27, 2008

I was just reading about a woman and her young daughter who were on a flight - it happened to be the girls first flight ever. She was old enough to understand the basic concept and she was excited to experience everything. In order to do so, she asked to sit by the window so that she could see everything but at the same time she tried to contain her excitement. As the plane taxied down the run way, she glanced out the window from now and then and one might have observed that she was a bit nervous as the plane left the ground and headed skyward - but she maintained her composure. She seemed a little concerned as the plane entered the clouds and both the earth below and the sky above were obscured. But then the plane broke through the cloud cover and the little girl realized that they were above the clouds. When she made that realization she became extremely excited, pressing her nose against the window - looking from side to side - desperately searching for something until finally she turned to her mother and asked, "Where are they?" The mother was puzzled and sought an explanation, "What are you talking about?" The girl quickly responded, "Where are the angels?"

When Paul traveled around the area of the Mediterranean Sea he must have had a great many interesting experiences and great challenges. But I have long thought that the experiences recorded in our first lesson for today must have been one of the most fascinating and perhaps one of the more difficult. Here Paul had come to the heart of the Greek culture. Athens was a great city filled with beautiful architecture. The inspiring Acropolis and temple to Diana stood as overpowering sentinels overlooking the Areopagus where Paul spoke to the gathered crowds. The area was surrounded by a market place that was filled with shoppers going about their daily business. And in the midst of all of the activity philosophers and politicians and religious folk would come to exchange idea and debate philosophical positions. There people came to try to sell their moral, political and religious views. And that day Paul had his chance.

I suspect that for some those who gathered there, what Paul had to say may have seemed like just one more belief among many. After all these were people who were willing to believe in almost anything and anyone. They would look for 'gods' under any rock and angels on every cloud. Their streets were lined with statutes and monuments to the various gods that had become an accepted part of they culture. But they knew that they did not have it all figured out. They were so religious and afraid of offending

any of the gods that they even tried to protect themselves against the wrath of any god that they may not know about. So, just to be sure, they erected one monument that was dedicated to 'an unknown god'.

I suppose that there is a sense in which we have nothing in our world today to compare with the situation Paul encountered in Athens in those days. We do not erect statutes to many different gods and line the streets with them. Nor do we have many public forums in which we can stop by to debate the latest philosophies & religious teachings. But it may also be true that the more things change the more they stay the same. The 'gods' may be different and the public forums may have changed formats but I think our world today is very much like the world which Paul addressed. The market places still surrounds us. Speakers address the public forums through mass media espousing belief in every conceivable morality, and every philosophical and political position. Statutes of various 'gods' may not line the streets but they float across the air ways and through cyberspace - they can be seen on desk tops in office building and classrooms in a variety of forms. Of course we, in Bottineau are more homogeneous than many parts of our country where much more diverse beliefs are common - but even here the choices and variations on faith issues are many and complex. And in the midst of difficult cultural and life issues people search for God! Some have given up trying to figure out this God stuff. They believe in God but not in the gods that they hears people preach about so they just design the god they want out of the things they believe - and from time to time as it fits their beliefs they pause to think about this 'unknown god'!

I believe that people really want to know God - they long for a god to whom they can turn in times of need but too often they have been turned off by the church - so they **grope** for God.

It is an interesting word that Paul used to direct the people who had so many gods to seek this unknown God. To 'grope for God' is to imply that those who search for Him are in the dark - it is as though they are blind and need to feel their way along until they finally touch Him. And in that moment, know they have found what they are looking for - found the very one in who we all 'live and move and have our being'.

I believe that we continue to 'grope' for God in our days. We long for some answers to some of the complex questions of life. We grope as though feeling our way in the darkness - searching desperately but not willing to really listen to anything that would disturb our statues of the kinds of gods that we worship.

And Paul, the Apostle steps into the middle of the gods of the Athenians to speak a word about Jesus - sent from the creator, rejected and put to death

- risen from the dead one through whom we live and move and have our being.

The verses following our first lesson give a little bit of an indication of how the people of Athens responded to Paul's message. - **"When they had heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.' a few became followers and believed..."**

Today we receive new members and we welcome you all. We hope that you come and have chosen to join us because you have found this to be a warm and welcoming family with which to share your religious life. We hope that this place, this worship and these people become a blessing to you. Mostly, we hope that you will encounter and come to know this great and mysterious God around who we gather. Sometimes we think we have this 'church stuff' figured out - but I suspect that you will find that we are all 'groping' for a deeper knowledge of and a closer relationship with the one God who does not want to remain 'unknown'. Together we will grope for the one God in who we truly live and move and have our being.

In a world that is filled with countless 'gods' and philosophies begging for our allegiance; in a world where anything goes and we are encouraged to think for ourselves and do our own thing, the scriptures continue to call us to be followers of and obedient to the one true God. It seems to me that with all the different moral, philosophical and religious teachings of our time - with statues to so many different gods, it has become more and more important to find the one God in who there is life and love. We need to search for that true God - know this, that God is searching for you!

AMEN