

I

Sometimes, when there's no one else around, I like to come and sit in this room and listen to the quiet. I like to think about the women and men and children who sat in these pews and prayed and sang and worshiped long before you or I were ever a twinkle in our mothers' eyes. As Carol noted in her prayers of the people recently, the walls of this room are bathed with the hymns and prayers and joys and sorrows of generations who have come before us.

By American standards, this is a very old sanctuary, dating back to 1855. But last month, my wife Amy and I had the opportunity to travel to Italy, and we visited a number of beautiful churches, several of which have been in continuous use for nearly 1,000 years now.

Standing there, thinking about all those generations who have come before us, I was reminded once again about of a basic truth about human nature - we are hard-wired to worship.

II

We human beings are doxological creatures. The word doxology literally means "words of glory," and we were hard-wired to join with our fellow human beings to give words of glory – to orient our hearts and minds around something or someone greater than ourselves.

History teaches us that that every great ancient civilization, on every part of the globe, had some sort of spirituality at the center of its culture, from the Egyptians in North Africa to the ancient Chinese in

east Asia to the Mayans in Central America, and the list goes on.

Some might argue that all religions are just artifacts that have remained behind in our evolution from a superstitious, pre-modern society. But consider that the human impulse to be connected to other human beings and something or someone larger than ourselves runs very deep. In cities and towns and villages all over the world today people gather together regularly in stadiums and arenas and concert halls, and they often experience transcendence in those places when they feel connected to each other and to something powerful, something larger than themselves. Consider that just a few blocks from here, on fall Saturday afternoons, people come to our city from north and south and east and west and together, they quite literally sing words of glory.

We are hard-wired that way, and that natural human impulse cuts across all boundaries of geography, time, and culture. But the gospel makes some particular claims about the origins of that impulse within us. The gospel makes some particular claims about who God is, and who we are. The gospel makes some particular claims about the nature of our relationship to each other and to God, and about our ultimate destiny.

And from time to time, those specific, particular claims about God run up against other claims. And that interaction is at the heart of our story this morning.

III

We're continuing this morning with our reading from the Acts of the Apostles,

or simply Acts for short, which tells the story of the birth and growth of the church in the years following Christ's death and resurrection.

At the center of our story once again this morning is a man named Paul, who, as you may remember, was once the chief persecutor of the early church, but by the grace of God became the first-century church's most important theologian, writer, and missionary. Paul was born and raised as a faithful first-century Jew, but he also held Roman citizenship, and Paul and his companions have been traveling throughout the Roman empire with the good news about Jesus. Sometimes, Paul's message has been met warmly, and as we read last week, at other times his message has been met with incarceration, beatings, and threats of death. But nevertheless, Paul's missionary journeys continue.

When we pick up our story today, we find the Apostle Paul is in the ancient city of Athens, Greece. By this time in history, Athens was no longer the center of power in the region that it once was, as by the first century CE, the Greek empire had long since fallen while the Roman empire rose.

Even so, first-century Athens was still a leading city, and it was incredibly religiously and ethnically diverse. There was a long-standing Jewish community in the city, but of course, Athens was also full of temples and shrines to the gods of Greek mythology, many of which the Romans simply adopted and gave new names. And apparently, the city had so many shrines and temples to so many different gods that the Athenians forgot which shrine went with which god, so they made a catch-all

shrine, and inscribed upon it simply, "To an unknown god."

When Paul arrived in Athens, he made a careful study of the city's customs and culture, and then he went to the town square, as it were, a place in Athens called the Areopagus, and he began to address the Athenians.

So listen now for a Word from God from Acts 17:15-34.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious 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 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, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope 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.'

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

By the time the Apostle Paul arrived in Athens sometime in the first century CE, there had been so many shrines and temples to various gods built in the city over so many centuries that in some cases the Athenians had lost track of which shrine went with which god, so they had simply taken one and placed upon it the moniker, "to an unknown god."

And that's what captured the Apostle Paul's imagination as he strolled through ancient Athens. And so when he had the opportunity to address the Athenians, that's where he began his remarks. He noted the shrine dedicated to an unknown god, and then he began his proclamation of the gospel. "What worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you," he began.

And then he began to describe for them all the ways in which the one God, who made all that is, seen and unseen, has

been revealed to us, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

IV

My friend, you were made to worship. And God's great desire is that you would come to know God, that you would come to trust God, that you would come to a relationship with God. You and I both know that there are all kinds of other things in our world that compete for our worship. There are all kinds of other things in our world that seek to lure our hearts and minds away from giving glory to the one true God. God's desire is that you would come to know and worship the God who created you, who redeems you, who loves you more than you or I can ever imagine.

But there is a problem. As the first hymn we sang this morning reminds us, God is immortal, invisible, and God only is wise. But we are mortal, and our human brains, as incredible as they are, cannot possibly comprehend the totality of the power and majesty of God. As John Calvin, our theological ancestor observed, it is not possible for us to measure God's immeasurableness with any human measure.

So in order that we might come to know who God is, what God is like, what God's desire is for us, in order that we might be in relationship with God, God has revealed God's own self to us in Jesus Christ.

And that theological claim, that Jesus isn't just God's doppelganger or messenger or agent, but that Jesus is God in the flesh, is what makes the gospel story compelling. Because lots of religions and

philosophies make claims about how we humans can become more like gods. Lots of religions and philosophies make claims about how we can get from earth to heaven.

But the gospel claim is that in Jesus, heaven came to earth. The gospel says that instead of demanding that you and I overcome our human limitations in order to come to God, in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God comes to you and me.

And you can see, I think, how some of the Athenians who heard this radical theological claim were scandalized. You can see why some of them scoffed. Because it's a radical claim – that the God who created all that is, seen and unseen, the God who is the author of time itself, the God whose power is so far beyond our human imagining, would concern God's self with little old you and little old me at all, much less to take on human flesh and become like us.

But such are the lengths that God is willing to God to be known by you, my friend. Such are the lengths that God is willing to go to be in relationship with you. God is not unknown or unknowable, and there's nothing that God wouldn't give for you, my friend, so deep is God's love for you. There's nowhere that God wouldn't go for you, even through the gates of hell itself. God has revealed God's self to you in Jesus Christ, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

V

Sometimes as I sit in the quiet space of this sanctuary, I think about all the ways our city has changed since this room was

built in 1855. Our forebears could scarcely have imagined how religiously diverse 21st century Athens, Georgia, would be. You and I are multiple times more likely to encounter someone of a different faith or of no particular faith at all than our ancestors who lived even a generation ago.

And so as we continue to live in this age of great diversity, like the Apostle Paul, when we encounter someone different than ourselves, may we strive to find points of connection and common cause. May we be kind and respectful of lines of difference, remembering that all human beings were created by God and are hard-wired to worship.

And like the Apostle Paul, when the opportunity presents itself, may we proclaim the gospel truth that has been revealed to us with conviction, sincerity, and boldness. Like the Apostle Paul, may we not be so concerned with winning an argument or adding numbers to our side as we are with being faithful stewards of the good news that has been entrusted to our stewardship.

For God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, but 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.

Thanks be to God. Amen.