

A Way Among Ways

Fellow spiritual seekers: With eyes open or closed, I invite you to join your hearts with mine in prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for the freedom to be gathered for worship today, both on our live stream and on this land – loved by First Nations and others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. Help us in this hour to recognize anew how following in the way of Jesus draws us into awareness of life in your steadfast presence. We pray this in the name of our friend and teacher, Jesus. Amen.

A few years ago, a colleague told me about a preaching specialist named Lisa Cressman. She is known throughout the nation and happened to grow up at Ascension Episcopal Church in Stillwater, Minnesota. Through a business she founded with the name Backstory Preaching, Lisa guides preachers toward discovering deep joy in the adventure of preaching. In an article entitled “Do You Believe the Sermons You Preach?” she asserts this: *“After all the praying, sifting, and discerning we do before and during our prep, the sermon offers our best understanding of the ways God was with the people in the Scripture and is present with us now.”* Lisa encourages her fellow preachers to answer this question related to the texts of the week: *“What is the Good News I believe?”*

Well, friends, our texts for this morning remind me of three things I believe:

- I believe this good news as conveyed across the arc of the text from Acts for today: We can enrich and deepen our own awareness of God’s presence when we open ourselves to learning from the ways others experience that which is greater than themselves.
- Second, with Paul, I believe this good news: We can trust in the steadfast loving presence of a God who is (in his words) *“the One who is not really far from any of us.”*

- And third, with poet Kate Lore, I believe this good news: Jesus showed us how to worship God (which she describes as “*that sacred, boundary-breaking, life-giving force*”) with all that we are and all that we do.

I hope this moment of reflection will open a door or a window for you as you journey draw inspiration from Christian faith within the beautiful tapestry of faithful paths within our pluralistic society.

I invite you to wonder with me about the first belief I shared: Do you trust that you can enrich and deepen your own awareness of God’s presence when you open yourself to learning from the ways others experience that which is greater than themselves?

I was struck by the word “revolted” describing Paul’s visceral response to his neighbors at the outset of our reading from Acts. We heard “*his spirit was revolted by the sight of the city given over to idols.*” We know Paul was on a missionary journey, traveling from city to city in an attempt to share Jesus’ particular message of the love of one God in whom all “live and move and have our being.” So his initial glimpse at the worshipping ways of the Athenian people stirred up revulsion (horror, dismay, disgust, FEAR).

I sense that Paul may have been so brittle in his reaction to Athenian religious culture because he has been caught up in the blissful bubble of a Jesus-following echo chamber. This is a moment in which I find Paul very relatable. **I wonder: Have you (like Paul and me) had a recent experience where your passion for your own point of view, priorities, or practices caused you to be brittle in your reaction to the another whose point of view or priorities or practices are distinctly different from yours?**

The good news plays out in the interactions among the residents of the city and Paul.

Whether Jew or Greek, Epicurean or Stoic philosopher, or among the curious others; the people enjoyed debating ideas with one another and invited (importantly – invited) Paul to tell them more about his teachings – even honoring him with an opportunity to speak to the gathered community.

And Paul accepted the invitation. He had clearly come on strongly, what with their direct feedback about how strange his theological ideas were to them. But he responded to their openness in kind. Instead of turning away embarrassed, he stepped into the fray of debate so that he could share his passion, hear the passion of others, and hone his convictions within gathered community. We can each follow the examples of the characters in this story – potentially moving from revulsion to exchange of ideas.

Now I invite you to wonder with me about the second belief I shared: Do you trust in the steadfast loving presence of a God who is (in Paul's words) *"the One who is not really far from any of us"*? Next Sunday, we will have the honor, privilege and gift to hear from one of our youth – Zoey – her personal specific statement of faith as we celebrate her Confirmation. Let's hear again Paul's distilled personal statement of faith. Here's how he sees it:

"God is the One who gives everyone life, breath – everything... so that human beings would seek, reach out for, and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us – the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As one of your poets has put it, 'We too are God's children.' If we are in fact children of God, then it's inexcusable to think that the Divine Nature is like an image of gold, silver, or stone – an image formed by the art and thought of mortals. God, who overlooked such ignorance in the past, now commands all people everywhere to reform their lives."

I wonder: In what aspect of your life in this present day does that huge Spirit of God long to work with your spirit – to reform you so that you will love more fully and live more fully into your shared belovedness?

And finally, I invite you to wonder with me about the third belief I shared: Do you trust that you can worship God (which Kate Lore describes as “*that sacred, boundary-breaking, life-giving force*”) with all that you are and all that you do?

As we go into this day, longing to worship God with all that we are and all that we do, I wish to share an echo of the end of Kate Lore’s poem (a blessing, really). You may wish to close your eyes or hold them open. Hear these words as encouragement to us:

*“For when we cease confusing human hunger for power
with the will of the Holy,
we are free again to follow the One we trust.*

*And those who still hear Christ’s quieter call—
to mercy without condition,
to justice without exception,
to love that does not keep score—
will find one another.*

*And we will build, again,
a community of open doors,
where no one must prove their worth to belong,
and no one is turned away.”*

In the coming days, may we each find new opportunities to show “*love that doesn’t keep score*” – so that we continue finding one another and learning from each other’s ways. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Acts 17:16-30, “Let it be Named”