

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD

Texts on Sunday, May 20, 2007

John 17: 20-26; Acts 17: 16-34

Augustine said "Men go to gape at mountain peaks, at the boundless tides of the sea, the broad sweep of rivers, the encircling ocean and the motions of the stars: and yet they leave themselves unnoticed; they do not marvel at themselves."

If the apostle Paul came back and found us scouring his letters word by word for every grain of truth, how do you suppose he would feel? I think he might be angry. *What? Have you not grown at all? For 2000 years, I have been conversing with lovers of God from all over the world, listening, learning, comprehending the death and life of my Lord Jesus anew again and again, growing. You can sail the world any hour of the day—it took me weeks to sail to Athens—but you read my old letters, as if God has done nothing new among you? Get a life. You’ve got to get out of the box!*

Someone might object that this picture of Paul perturbed is no more than a personal hunch, and a risky one at that. It suggests that the guidance of truth can be—must be—sought *beyond* the pages of Scripture. To which we answer: Yes and No, for it is the pages of Scripture themselves which send us beyond the book toward a God yet unknown. The good news of Jesus Christ is not that we have found him, but that Christ is alive in us and waiting to rise in us where we are still asleep with fear, resistance, and laziness. When Paul writes, "The letter kills—but the Spirit gives life," does he not send the Church beyond the pages of Scripture to the source of life itself?

When the author of the Gospel of John writes, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you," (John 14:26) has he not told us the source of his gospel?—namely, that it was written not from memories and reports, but from the Spirit; that is, as if from a deep well, John drew up from within himself all these sayings. They did not "happen." They are not red letters on the page magically spirited there, God knows how, from Jesus' private prayer room. They are inspiration—a sign of *real* power in the Spirit, coming to the author to help him guide and confirm his own church in their faith. That is why John concludes his stories saying, "These are written so that you may come to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." (John 20:31) In other words, God so loves the world that God gives to servants of every age the wisdom and the words to write it so that you may come to trust in God through Christ. The Scriptures' precious message is not visible and not audible to those who read or listen casually. The message is: *God gives life, and the life God gives is not in the book, but in you together. You must get out of the box to be raised toward God you have not yet known.*

The confusing and chaotic religious fact of our time is that the church cannot contain the goodness of God. Already in the 1960s, the sociologist of religion Robert Bellah observed that

" . . . man's [whole] relation to the ultimate conditions of his existence is no longer the monopoly of any groups explicitly labeled religious. However much the development of Western Christianity may have . . . created the modern religious situation, it is obviously no longer in control of it. Every fixed position has become open to question in the process of making sense out of man and his situation."¹

Divine life, life without end but God, has spilled over the embankments of the church and is running freely down the hillsides of all humanity, yet the waters of life cannot be drunk without a cup—but our cups are kept in a cupboard. We don't practice sharing the cup of abundant life with people whose lips do not speak our language. From prison in the 1940s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

The old words of churches are incapable of being saving words anymore. The old words fail and fall silent, and our

¹ Bellah, Robert. *Beyond Belief* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1970) p. 42

Christian life consists only of prayer and trying to do the right thing. It is not for us to foretell the day, but the day will come when some are called to utter the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. There will be a new language, perhaps quite unreligious, but liberating and saving, like the language of Jesus, so that people are horrified by it, and yet conquered by its power, the language of a new truth, the language that foretells the peace of God and the coming of the Kingdom.²

Usually, the loud mouthpieces of the Christian church cluck and moan over the fact that every fixed position has become open to question. They do not want this much freedom and responsibility. They want to go back to a time when, as they suppose, all the righteous bowed obediently to the right God. To be sure, they are willing to serve up the newest programming with the best technology money can buy and substitute praise music for organ, but the tyranny of Jesus they will not relinquish. They want to go back to Egypt.

When Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way;" when he went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of their worship; when he found an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god,' he did not assume they were evil. He did not condemn them with fire of judgment. We see now that he did not really understand their philosophies; especially, he misunderstood how they had evolved and abandoned belief in the divine powers of stone carvings and gold statues. Nevertheless, he was moved to see the essential unity between their religious desire and his own experience of the risen Christ. Therefore he could say: "Of what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you: The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth . . . has made all nations to inhabit the whole earth . . . 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."

The message is not *Do not bother people's heads with Christ, since grace is everywhere*. The message is, Grace is everywhere, and the word of Christ is a cup with which to drink, so learn to dip this cup in the living waters which are everywhere. If you do not, you hoard from the thirsty, as if you believed the fountains of God are not springing abundantly in the deserts. Paul's bold welcome prefigures an openness which Christians have been loath to embrace, but now we see, as Robert Bellah put it, that "the analysis of modern man as secular, materialistic, dehumanized, and in the deepest sense areligious [seems] fundamentally misguided." (p. 40) What it means to be human has really developed and changed in the centuries since Jesus walked among us. We may rejoice that the power and presence of Christ's Spirit is at the heart of these astounding developments. No longer is one called to be an obedient soldier in the ranks of social and religious control. The time for such obedience is past. Now, by the grace of God, we have met ourselves anew. We are "a dynamic multidimensional self capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation, capable, again within limits, of remaking the world, including the very symbols with which [we meet] it. Freedom has increased because [our] existence has been conceived as more complex, more open, and more subject to change and development." (p. 42)

Oh, how excited Paul would have been to see our time; how alert to truth sent by a poem like this of Wallace Stevens, as you yourselves are alert:

Perhaps

the truth depends on a walk around a lake,
A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica, a stop to watch
A definition growing certain and
A wait within that certainty, a rest

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1997), p. 300

In the swags of pine trees bordering the lake.
Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,
As when the cock crows on the left and all
Is well, incalculable balances,
At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes
And a familiar music of the machine sets up its Schwärmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen,
As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which
We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist.

To go this way into the world—this open—is to go the way of the Cross, the way of relinquishment, the upward way and the end of domination. You cannot go this way by merely going to church each week. Your Cross walk wants more, wants real mastery—a “substitution of conscious intention for [what had been] unconscious striving.” (Walter Lippmann) You’ve got to get out of the box, as Jesus did, as Paul did, to learn how to speak the language so others can hear it; to encounter an unknown God.

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Central Presbyterian Church

*delivered at First Presbyterian Church
Buffalo, New York*

Rev. Phelps offered this day’s benediction from the last words of the first sermon he delivered in the city of Buffalo, eight years ago this week:

“Any particular Christian community whom God graces with power to forsake its former life in order to descend into the world as it really is, and to minister there without ideology or fear, will never fail, no matter how its material fortunes fare, no matter what becomes of the moribund denominations, no matter how the gospel is distorted through the media of human power and domination. If God graces us with the will and imagination to respond, we will find that nearly everything we were accustomed to as “church” must at one time or another become subject to a questioning and a divine forfeiture, because we will come to understand that the language of the church, so familiar to us, is inaudible to one who is not here. And how can we hope to be one, as God and Christ are one, if we are not willing to give up our high place and go to meet him or her just as Jesus did. Now it is ours to seek this ministry. You will know it by the shape of the Cross.”