

“Keeping Our Altars Open”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
May 17, 2020
10:30 am e-Worship

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

Let's travel back to first century Greece, to the city of Athens, where we will feel small among the temples and buildings that are monuments to the gods, because they loom so much larger than we do, and because they go back hundreds, even thousands of years before our existence. The apostle Paul ended up in Athens after preaching in Thessalonica and Beroea; his preaching in those places had caused controversy, so he went to Athens to find safety. Still, he could not help but preach the good news of Jesus Christ in the marketplace and in the synagogue, and also with the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, stirring up both interest and anger in a city that was built around the monuments to various gods and goddesses. So, they brought him to the Areopagus, which is basically a giant rock of limestone going back to the Jurassic period, jutting out of the earth, and looking upon the Acropolis, a city to the gods made of marbled temples. The Areopagus had a history: long before Paul's time, it was a place of judgment for capital crimes; legend has it that Ares, the God of War, was tried there for the murder of the son of Poseidon, the God of the Sea. Later, it served as a sort of Senate, and then again as a judicial court.

What Paul presented on top of Areopagus served as both a sermon, and a judicial hearing. Acts tells us, “Now all the Athenians and foreigners there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” They were a curious people, and Paul surely gave them “something new” to think about.

Paul acknowledged how religious they were: standing not far from them, the majestic Parthenon, a temple to Athena, towered, as well as other buildings and sanctuaries, dedicated to gods and goddesses such as Zeus, Artemis, and Poseidon. Paul points out something-- he noticed that among all these monuments to the famous gods and goddesses of Greece sat a simple altar, an empty one, with no statue towering before it, which bore the inscription, “To an unknown god.” Archeologists in the last century found such an altar not far from this site, “Either for a god or sacred goddess.”

Paul seized upon the Greeks' inclination to worship a god whom they do not know yet, and he readily supplied them with the idea that they have been moved to worship the one God who needs no idols or shrines, one in whom “we live and move and have our being.”

I like this idea of keeping our altars open. It gives us a chance to let God be God, rather than us defining God and placing God into a category that might be too limiting for who God is and what

God can do. I have a friend who used to work together in ministry with me. He is a father of 4, and he and his spouse both work demanding jobs. As you can imagine, their lives get a little bit chaotic. But he shared with me a simple practice he keeps: there is a drawer in his kitchen that never gets filled. No silverware, no children's artwork, no bills to be paid or car keys get shoved in there. It just stays empty. No matter how chaotic their household becomes, he knows that somewhere in the craziness sits an empty drawer, a world of its own of peace and calm--- and if he needs to, mentally, he can put his anxieties and frustrations, his fear and confusion, in that drawer so that those feelings can be worked into something more peaceful.

I understand why some would find the idea of an empty altar and an unknown God to be worthless. There seems something lonely about a God we cannot see or touch or hear, a God whose name we do not actually know. It feels lonely, like 9 weeks of quarantine and unknown weeks or months more to go feels lonely. And so we erect idols, who can be here with us, right now, and place them as reminders that we aren't alone. Sure, I know these days our idols are not made of marble or of gold; but trust me, whether in our own kitchens, on our screens, or in our wallets, we have idols we worship daily instead of turning to a God we cannot know through sight or touch. But I wonder if maybe even more than not knowing *who* God is, we fear the loneliness we feel when we consider *we* won't be known by God.

In the face of such fears, Jesus gives us a promise: "I will not leave you orphaned." We know from Jesus that we won't be abandoned to sit and wait at empty altars. Instead, Jesus promises, God will send you "an Advocate to be with you forever." As he goes on, it becomes clear Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who cannot be seen or heard, but whom we *can* know because that same Spirit abides with us and will be in *you*.

Now, I have been told throughout my ministry that for some Presbyterians, understanding the Holy Spirit can be the most challenging part of the Trinity-- that is, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. But in our church's un-Sunday School adult bible study yesterday, we sort of had a breakthrough. The moment we read the word "Advocate," two nurses in our group-- Ingrid and Linda-- perked up. They shared that being an "Advocate" is a fundamental part of the call to nursing. I asked my cousin Mitchel, who is a nurse in a NYC hospital, and he absolutely agreed. As Linda and Ingrid described it, the nurse is an advocate for the patient. We know they are the hands that provide the comfort and care, the embodied presence that carries out the orders of the doctors, who are often a step removed and only see patients briefly. As they interpret the directions given by doctors, to make sure they are followed through correctly, they must also catch and correct any mistakes made by the medical team, even from those higher up in the hospital hierarchy.

My cousin Mitchel shared a situation in his hospital. He is specifically trained for a unit that does open heart surgery and lung surgery. However, when the COVID crisis hit, he was sent to that front line and cared entirely for COVID patients. One day, he was called into an emergency operation for a patient going through a radical lung surgery-- and this patient had tested negative for the coronavirus. Mitchel knew he had been exposed to the virus day after day, and

so he thought it would be unethical to work on a “clean” patient. And so, he insisted to his director, who was much further up the chain of the command, to find a nurse who wasn’t working in the COVID unit to treat this patient. In the end, his director agreed, and Mitchell believes that may have saved a life.

To think the Holy Spirit would be that insistent in providing what might save us makes me feel a little less alone. If the Holy Spirit, or Advocate, is like a nurse, I’m not sure what metaphor to use for God. Perhaps I can leave that altar open. But I wonder if Jesus is the patient, maybe even the one who didn’t make it off the ventilator. He has lain in that bed of suffering, and has lived the most fearful of human experiences. And yet, here is the hope: despite all he has gone through, he offers us peace, and tells us not to let our hearts be troubled, or to be afraid.

And, maybe we know God better than we think. Jesus tells us, “You *know* God, because God abides in you, and is in you.” So, instead of a lonely slab of stone with no statues standing nearby it, let us consider our own bodies, our own lives, as living altars where we can praise a God who actually shows up.