

The Sixth Sunday of Easter | May 14, 2023

Church of St. Paul and the Redeemer, Chicago | The Rev. Roger Ferlo

It took us a while to catch up in the printed bulletin, but have you noticed that in the past few Sundays our first reading is taken from the book of Acts on Sunday rather than from the Old Testament? It's the custom to read from the Acts of the Apostles—in effect, volume two of the Gospel according to Luke—during the fifty days of the Easter season. It's Luke's amazing chronicle of the aftermath of the Resurrection, with its climax in the conversion of Paul and his mission of preaching to the Gentiles rather than to his fellow Jews. That's a theme that animates everything Luke wrote—Jesus's message was for everyone, not just his fellow Jews.

I've always been uneasy about this public reading of Acts. There are a lot of fabulous episodes recorded in the Acts of the Apostles—speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost; the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch; the conversion of Paul (such a good story that Luke tells it more than once). But there is a dark side to all this. In so many of the episodes, Luke has Peter or one of the other apostles standing in a crowd of Jews and in effect accusing them of killing Jesus. Passages like these have provided excuses for anti-semitism and pogroms against Jews ever since. When I was in New York, I often quietly switched the reading to something more irenic from the Hebrew Bible.

No need for that today, I am glad to say. I was relieved to discover that in today's reading Paul's preaching is directed not toward disaffected Jews but toward sophisticated Athenians. It's almost as if

Paul found his way to Hyde Park. I can imagine him standing on a bench on University Avenue, hoping to attract the attention of a spiritual but not religious crowd before the university police get wind of the disturbance and escort him out.

In effect, the UC quadrangle is to Hyde Park what the Areopagus was to Athens, or at least I like to think so. The Areopagus was not a building but an open-air public platform, like Bughouse Square at Dearborn and Walton, across the street from the Newberry Library. It functioned that way for centuries, even millennia, attracting crowds to a stone outcropping just downhill from the Parthenon. I visited it once several years ago. There's nothing to be seen there today but the rocky shelf. You have to use your historical imagination. On and off in the centuries before Paul arrived it had been the center of aristocratic political life. By the fourth century before Paul launched his version of the Jesus movement, Athenian politics developed in a more democratic direction. The area fell into disuse. But by the time Paul arrived in Athens in the fourth or fifth decade of the Christian era, the area had undergone a kind of revival. Luke describes it as a gathering place for Stoics and Epicureans, philosophers and debaters who spent a lot of time speculating about what constituted the good life. So you might easily imagine the skeptical reception Paul endured from those seasoned intellectuals, finding their space invaded by this Jewish Christian evangelist born in an obscure

corner of present-day Turkey, speaking decent Greek but with a crude Anatolian accent.

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.

This was a pretty shrewd opening gambit, what the Roman rhetoricians would call *captatio benevolentiae*—you compliment your audience before you hit them with your pitch. "How extremely religious you are": the word Paul uses that gets translated as "extremely religious" is a Greek tongue-twister. It's "*desdaimonesterous*"—a word that occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. In other non-Biblical contexts it could be translated as "superstitious", but most translators opt in this context for "extremely religious." I like to think that the word *desdaimonesterous* is a companion of *pneumatikos*, one of Paul's favorite words, which you can translate as "spiritual." In effect, Paul is saying to these seasoned and skeptical intellectuals: "I see that you are religious and not just spiritual." Does that ever sound familiar! I suspect, though, that for Paul's audience, just the opposite was true. They would rather be spiritual than religious. I can't really blame them. Just like many people today who are wary and tired of institutions that claim a monopoly on the truth, these Epicureans and Stoics were in their own way spiritual, not religious. No need of temples or churches or synagogues, pagan, Jewish, Christian or otherwise. Paul's preaching fell flat. It's no

accident that we have evidence of Paul's success as an evangelist in other Greek-speaking cities—Corinth, Thessalonika, Ephesus—but nowhere will you find a letter from Paul to an Athenian congregation.

But still, it's Easter season, and a good time to consider what we really believe about what cannot be known in the way most things are known. One of the great paradoxes of both Jewish and Christian believing is that we declare our faith in a God who cannot be named, as Moses learned when he demanded to know which of the many gods of the time was speaking to him from the burning bush. "I AM WHO AM" the voice declares, at once revealing nothing and yet at the same revealing everything that matters. For Moses and his followers, including people like us who gather in places like this, we make no claims to know who or what God is but how God is. In other words, what we know is that God is, and that, as Paul declared on the Areopagus, that in ways both known and unknown, in ways both visible and invisible, God is at work in the world. We owe it to Paul, and to Luke, and all those first witnesses, that the unnamable Creator God has been made named and made known in the flesh, in the life and death of Jesus, and remains known to us now in the Spirit, in resurrected life.

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.

I like to think that declarations like this dissolve the boundary separating the "spiritual" from the "religious". You don't have to be religious to be spiritual, I know this. But for many of us, being religious helps. This is true, though, only if you're careful with how you use word "religious," or even more to the point, how you use the word "Christian." It's especially important in these dangerous days, where for many seekers of truth gathered in our present-day Areopagus the word "Christian" is synonymous with "whiteness" and "white nationalism," with anti-semitism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and misogyny. If that's what "religious" means, I am on the side of the spiritual, of the Stoics and Epicureans. And so should you be.

I guess our job going forward, especially in the dark and violent days that are upon us, is to reclaim the word Christian as our own. As I say, none of us here likely feels qualified to say who God is, although many theologians, past and present, do the best they can to get us close. But I suspect many of us nonetheless might be willing to testify in our lives

how God is, because we have witnessed how God is in Jesus and now in each other, as we strive to mirror Jesus' own radical hospitality in places like this: striving to be compassionate and not vindictive, embracing and not exclusive. We try to take Paul at his word, and together "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.'"

Here's what is for me is God's honest truth, at least the truth I for one try to live by: God is with us both as we are, and as we are for others. Knowing that God is with me as I am, well, that makes me spiritual. Knowing that God is with me only as I am for others, compassionate, forgiving, standing for equity and justice in whatever way I can, and doing so in community with other Christians, following Jesus's example—well, that makes me religious.

Spiritual, religious: in my experience at least, it's hard to be one without the other.