

May 21, 2017

“Feeling for God: The Known Unknown”

First Reading ~ Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Citizens of Athens, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at your shrines, I even discovered among them an altar inscribed, ‘To the Unknown God.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

“The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Sovereign of heaven and earth, doesn’t live in shrines made by human hands, and isn’t served by humans, as if in need of anything. No! God is the one who gives everyone life, breath — everything. From one source (one blood) God created all of humankind to inhabit the entire earth, and set the time for each nation to exist and the exact place where each nation should dwell. God did this so that human beings would seek, feel for God, and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any one of us — the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As one of your own 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 Deity is like an image of gold, silver or stone — an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. God, who overlooked such ignorance in the past, now commands all people everywhere to change their minds for the better and reform their lives. For a day has been set when the whole world will be judged with justice by one destined and appointed for that task. God has given proof of all of this by raising this judge from the dead.”

Second Reading

~ adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor in
An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith

If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say, “I am spiritual but not religious,” then I might not be any wiser about what that means— but I would be richer. I hear the phrase on the radio. I read it in interviews. People often say it to my face when they learn that I am a religion professor who spent years as a parish priest.

In that context, people are usually trying to tell me that they have a sense of the divine depths of things but they are not churchgoers. They want to grow closer to God, but not at the cost of creeds, confessions, and religious wars large or small. Some of them have resigned from religions they once belonged to, taking what was helpful with them while leaving the rest behind.

I think I know what they mean by “religious.” It is the “spiritual” part that is harder to grasp. My guess is they do not use that word in reference to a formal set of beliefs, since that belongs on the religion side of the page. It may be the name for a longing— for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life- they know there is more to life than what meets the eye. They have drawn close to this “More” in nature, in love, in art, in grief. They would be happy for someone to teach them how to spend more time in the presence of this deeper reality, but when they visit the places where such knowledge is supposed to be found, they often find the rituals hollow and the language antique.

People seem willing to look all over the place for this treasure. They will spend hours launching prayers into the heavens. They will travel halfway around the world to visit a monastery in India or to take part in a mission trip to Belize. The last place most people look is right under their feet, in the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives. What possible spiritual significance could a trip to the grocery store have? How could something as common as a toothache be a door to greater life? No one longs for what they already have, and yet, the accumulated insight of those wise about the spiritual life suggests that the reason so many of us cannot see the X that marks the spot is because we are already standing on it.