

Easter 6
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If any of Paul's friends before his conversion had heard his sermon to the Athenians, they would have been shocked. Not only was this former Pharisee preaching to the Gentiles but he was quoting their own poets to support his proclamation of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Paul had come a long way from his days of tracking down followers of Jesus to try them for blasphemy. His dramatic encounter with the Lord on the Road to Damascus had utterly changed his life. Paul speaking from the heart declared, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.....What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

Paul himself had always and in every way been religious. The God Paul sought after turned out to be very different from the God he now proclaimed. So different that zealous Jews now found Paul, once a zealot himself, preaching the Resurrection of Jesus to Gentiles right in the middle of the capital of the gentile world.

Coming to know the unknown God can have some pretty serious consequences.

As Christians, you and I are truly blessed. We are taught not only to worship our Creator, but to love the God who loved us enough to send his only Son to be incarnate among us. That Son lived and died as one of us but with the power to conquer both sin and death for all.

How many of us really know and believe in the mighty God? Do we as followers of Jesus really behave as if we and all those around us are God's children?

Would the world we live in be in such a mess, if we really acted like people who live and move and have our being in God?

Put that way, many of us who call ourselves Christian, are most of the time worshiping an unknown God. Many of us live our lives apart from Sunday morning as if the world revolved around us rather than the God we worship and believe in.

We discover in our lessons appointed for this morning what it is that God asks of us as believers. We are reminded that we cannot claim ignorance as an excuse to ignore God. We are told not just to feel sorry for the things we have done that violate God's creation and one another but to turn our lives around, to be converted. We are urged to make a point of living in a more respectful way.

How is it that we are supposed to do that? Jesus said to his followers, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Everything depends on how we define this love. Jesus defines this love as: "love one another as I have loved you." This love is self sacrificing. It is the kind of love that is willing to risk all for another. It is the kind of love that puts the other person before the self in all situations.

Sounds like a pretty tall task. Jesus goes on to tell his followers that he will ask the Father to send them the Advocate to help them to follow this commandment. The Greek word used here by the gospel writer John is *paraclete*. It is best translated "one who walks along side or abides with." This use is found only in John as he identifies the Holy Spirit as "the Advocate from the Father" that Jesus promised.

Throughout his ministry Jesus had been the Paraclete or Advocate for his disciples - their guide, intercessor, teacher, sustainer and comforter. Now as Jesus goes to the cross and ascends into glory he will not leave his disciples alone as orphans to face persecution and even death. Jesus will pray to the Father to send them an Advocate to be with them forever.

Jesus describes the Advocate as "the Spirit of truth." This presence that walks along with us in this life is a gift to the community of faith so that we might continue to recognize and value the truth. When the disciples could no longer see the physical Jesus they had the abiding presence of God with them and in them. The Spirit or Advocate dwells in everyone who loves Jesus and keeps his commandments. Moreover this Advocate or Spirit is what unites us to God and to each other forever.

The disciples were aware of the ministry of the Spirit as it had been revealed to them in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus' promise is that God will continue to work through Jesus' followers to do the work of reconciliation begun by Jesus. The defining characteristic of the Church is the enduring love, power and presence of God in all of creation working in and through them, in and through us.

This ministry committed to our care is never easy. We live in a world where we are more and more disconnected than connected. As the world becomes more impersonal it seems the other is more likely to be our enemy than our friend. Fred

Rogers of "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" was once asked why people seemed so afraid to talk to one another. He thought for a moment and then said, "Perhaps we think that we won't find another human being inside that person, and how sad it is to think that we would give up on any other creature who is just like us."

Just as we need to affirm that God is in control in some sense that we can barely imagine or comprehend we also need to know that God has reached out to us in Jesus who lived, taught, healed and died in human form. God continues to dwell among us whenever and wherever we meet as brothers and sisters in God's name. The Spirit who is our life becomes revealed in power and love when we seek to keep Jesus commandment to love as we are loved.

I recall going with a friend of mine in North Carolina to hear one of the hip preachers who had emerged a few years ago. The preacher came out on a stage dressed in a black shirt, black trousers, black Reebok tennis shoes and a white belt. His appeal was like that of a rock star. People stood and whooped and hollered as he came on stage. It was nothing like the polite applause for preachers like Billy Graham. Let me tell you, it was easy to get caught up in the energy of the moment as loud music filled the room, lights flashed all around and this charismatic preacher began to talk. It seems I remember that he preached for nearly two hours. I was amazed that people sat that long to listen to anyone much less a preacher.

The only thing I recall about what he said struck me because there I was right in the middle of the Bible belt. I was part of a clergy group and I knew the message preached by most of my fellow clergy to their congregations on Sunday. This hip preacher told the crowd if worship on Sunday makes you feel bad then it is not Christian worship. Maybe he did not know that many people complained that the problems we face today are due to the fact that preachers don't preach enough hell, fire and damnation. I wanted to jump up and shout, "Amen." But as you know, that is not my style.

The incarnational message of God in Jesus is that as we search for God, "God is not far from each one of us." In fact we cannot make God come any closer than being the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Our baptismal covenant reminds us that to be incorporated into body of Christ affirms God's ever presence as a gift from God offered to us without a price. We belong to God, a promise Paul tells us is sealed when God raised Jesus from the dead.

Our whole lives, if we are to be true to Christ, must be lived seeking the truth, caring about each other, and sharing God's love. We must proclaim the Good News of Christ thoughtfully and with deeds of justice and mercy.

In the end we will join the chorus begun in Psalm sixty-six "We praise God who has liberated the oppressed and heard our prayer." Amen