

“A Praying Congregation: Healing Our Image of God”
Acts 17:16-28

In December of 2022, something very interesting happened in the world of physics. Three physicists were awarded the physics Nobel Prize for their work on moving toward proving entanglement. The idea is that particles can be linked to each other even if they are separated by large distances. There was also the experience of scientists from Harvard, MIT, Caltech, Fermilab, and Google who used Google’s quantum computer to create a wormhole in a 2-dimensional universe. Wormholes are tunnels through the universe that are shortcuts through space and time. What is fascinating to me from a faith point of view about all of this is that according to Heinrich Pas reporting on this, “Properly understood, entanglement implies that the universe is ‘monistic,’ as philosophers call it, that on the most fundamental level, everything in the universe is part of a single, unified whole.” This means that everything is connected and not just theoretically but fundamentally.

This is what faith teaches us about the nature of God and the nature of the universe. We often have the illusion that we are separate from God, from each other, and from the rest of the universe. Yet, in its essence life is about that deep connection. Prayer can help heal our sense of separation because it grounds us in the reality of the energy of the divine which permeates all there is. The brilliance and power of the Bible is that it tells us stories of faith of people experiencing God in their daily life. Our ancestors in faith have known God to be a part of their daily struggles. Jesus came and challenged a lot of the thinking of Greek philosophy about God. In his very being, Jesus showed us that God is part of this human experience.

In our Bible story for today, we see Paul trying to help philosophers at the heart of Athens get into this way of seeing God and the world. The setting is the Areopagus of Athens. This was the place of the highest court in Athens. This court consisted of nine magistrates/nobles who ruled the city and helped move that culture into democracy. At the time of Paul, it was a place where philosophical, religious, judicial, and political issues were discussed. Paul had entered into discussions with other philosophers in Athens which led up to this time in front of this high court. Paul was passing through Athens but his short time in Athens became significant enough to lead him to this encounter.

What is interesting in this story is that despite his personal discomfort with the many gods of the Greeks, Paul, who was a monotheist, wanted to help the Greeks understand how God was not a distant reality or idea, but is the One who is the energy of all of life; the One they saw and experienced in Christ. Let’s listen to Acts 17:16-28

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place^[h] every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this

new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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, ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ From one ancestor[□] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

The first statement Paul makes was building a bridge of understanding with the Greeks, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Even though the belief system of the Greeks which included many gods and was so contradictory to Paul's Jewish monotheistic (belief in one God) belief, Paul did not claim superiority over the Greeks. He did not reject everything they believed. What he did so masterfully was to find a point of connection with them to share his own faith. Not only that, but also in verses 28, Paul quotes to the Greeks some of their own poetry to explain his theological understanding of God in Christ. The famous words which we often attribute to Paul, "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'" were in fact the words of a Greek poet and philosopher whom Paul was quoting. In addition, Paul used the altar which was marked "To an Unknown god" as another starting point to talk about his understanding of God. Paul was helping to point people in the direction of a higher unity.

Paul was born in the Greek seaport city of Tarsus (which is now in southern Turkey) which was the center for Stoic philosophers. He later encountered and debated with Epicurean philosophers as recorded in the verses we did not read today from Chapter 17. They were good philosophies but were so different from Jewish thought and faith. In all of it, though, Paul saw the connections and the bridges that could be built. He had a higher perspective that rose above all the human differences. The people had their allegiance to the emperor, but Paul was reminding them that the divine connection they had was much bigger than they ever imagined. Paul saw God in everything and in everyone. Paul's personal experience of conversion on the way to Damascus when he was blinded by the light of Christ, changed everything for him. He was a man set in his own ways of thinking. He saw others, especially those who believed differently as threats to be eliminated. But when he had this vision and experience of the love of God, his vision expanded to see God as a universal presence in all. Just like many of us, Paul's God prior to that experience was judgmental, vindictive, narrow-minded, and only accepted people if they behaved or believed a certain way. Any of you can identify with this vision? This was the God of the ego. But through the power of a vision into the vastness of the reality of God's

love, Paul moved deep into his soul to reach beyond that fearful type of God to embrace a larger reality of the divine. God healed Paul's vision and he in turn was trying to help others heal as well.

Part of the challenge in prayer for many people is their image of God is often negative, especially on a subconscious level. I can tell you from personal experience, I have seen many people worry if they are going to hell or feel that God is not loving or doesn't even exist because of the innocent suffering in our world. Does your image of God invite you to deep intimacy with God or does it keep you at a distance? Sometimes people say, "I have to be right with God," as if we are ever wrong with God. We sometimes are also stuck thinking of God as male. A good way to detect this if someone speaks to you about God as female. See how you react.

What are your worst fears about God? What are your questions for God? How do you think God sees you? What do you think God expects of you? What pictures or words come to mind when you think about God? What do your behaviors and feelings tell you about how you see God? You may find these questions to be difficult or even painful, but such exploration can lead to healing.

I would like to invite you to a time of visual meditation on the image of God for you.

Prayer Process by Matthew, Sheila, and Dennis Linn:

- Close your eyes and breathe deeply, breathing in the love of God that surrounds you.
- See the faces of the one or two people who have loved you the most. Breathe in the special gift of each person, such as gentleness, loyalty, listening, wisdom, etc.
- Take a moment to be with God as you understand God and appreciate how God loves you in these same ways.
- If there is any way you can't experience God as loving you at least as much as the person who loves you the most, be with your hurt and longing. Breathe in God's love and let God love you just as you are. Amen.