

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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God, Help Us to Keep Trying

Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, May 25, 2014

The Sixth Sunday of Easter—Based on Acts 17:22-31 and John 14:15-21

This is Memorial Day weekend, the unofficial start to the summer season, which unofficially ends Labor Day weekend. I realize this is countercultural, but I have come to love staying in the city over our three summer holiday weekends (Memorial Day, July 4th, and Labor Day) because the city seems so quiet. I even like being in the city during the summer because I enjoy the novelty of this city feeling comparatively quiet and empty.

It's easy for the actual Memorial Day to get lost in our three-day weekend and the start of summer mode. I read back over the history of Memorial Day this weekend. It helped me to remember that Memorial Day grew out of Decoration Day, which grew out of our country's deadly Civil War. Decoration Day was a day set aside to remember all who lost their lives in that particular war, a day to decorate their graves with flowers and flags, even to gather at the cemeteries for picnics. Different states observed Decoration Day on different dates, which may not surprise you. After WWI, the meaning of Memorial Day expanded to honor all the men and women who have died serving in our country's armed forces. In 1971, Memorial Day was set to be the last Monday in May.

I thought of the people in my own family who served in the Civil War, in WWII, Korea, Vietnam. They survived, but I think came home changed forever. I thought of my visit years ago to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. The stark black granite wall set into the earth's curves of soft green grass. Completely covered in names, yet reflecting my own face. I remembered one family in my childhood church whose son Joe died in the early years of the Vietnam War. I remembered that Joe's mother became a "Gold Star Mother."

I found Joe's name on the wall. I remembered his family's pain and anguish, and how their pain and anguish had been shared by everyone in our church. Suddenly I realized there were over 58,000 names on that wall. When I tried to multiply that one family's pain and anguish by 58,000, my math failed. The answer was too high to absorb. Yet it was real. And that was one war. And only U.S. soldiers' names.

No politics. A day for us to remember with respect those men and women, known and unknown, who have given their lives for the freedoms we enjoy, at a cost beyond measure.

From the Vietnam Memorial in Washington to Paul in the Aeropagus in Athens. There's a backstory to the passage we've just heard. Paul and Silas and Timothy have just been in Thessalonica, where Paul's preaching caused an uproar. Next they went to Berea, where they found a much more favorable reception. But some folks from Thessalonica have followed Paul and made trouble for him, so Paul is smuggled out under cover of darkness. Now Paul is in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him.

While he's waiting, Paul is doing what any tourist does—he's walking around downtown Athens, learning his way around, getting the lay of the land, reading the local newspapers, talking with the local shopkeepers. If you landed in Manhattan and had to wait here for your traveling companions, wouldn't you walk around these streets, see the sights, maybe catch a show, get to know the city and its culture, maybe try to engage a few locals in conversation? (Good luck with that.)

Paul is a highly educated, highly intelligent guy, a skillful debater. Greeks love a good debate. Athens at this time is the university center of the world, the city of Pericles and Demosthenes, of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. Though still a center of art, beauty, culture, and knowledge, Athens is no longer a political center, which is why Paul won't stay long.

Athenians pride themselves on their intellectual ability, and they delight in new ideas. No wonder they invite Paul to the Areopagus, a hill near the Acropolis where the Athenian council met—it's the place crowds gather to enjoy intellectual jousting.

This is an incredibly skillful speech by Paul. He knows his audience. He takes care to compliment the Athenians on how "extremely religious" they are, as evidenced by their many shrines (which of course privately drove Paul nuts). One of the ancient writers tells us that at this time there were 30,000 gods in Athens! It was said it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. Paul recognized these shrines were not merely objects of art, but were idols being worshipped by the people of Athens.

In his wanderings about town, Paul has noticed one altar inscribed "to an unknown god." These Athenians who pride themselves on their knowledge admit there is one thing they don't know. Or maybe this altar "to an unknown God" is just to cover all their bases—why get on any god's bad side by leaving him/her out.

Paul makes that altar to an unknown God his entry point for telling the Athenians about the God who cannot be contained in a shrine or temple or church, the God who made all of creation, who has made us his offspring, and in fact has created us to yearn for this God and to search for him, "the one in whom we live and move and have our being." To describe this God, Paul even uses lines of poetry the Athenians would have known. Paul meets them where they are, respectful of differences, seeking to engage them in honest dialogue, and expand the discussion—a good lesson in relevance and approach for those of us in the Church.

And Paul has them. He has them in the palm of his hands ... until he mentions the resurrection. In the verses that follow our reading, we learn that when Paul mentions "by raising him from the dead," it breaks up the gathering. Some Athenians go off laughing and making jokes. Others say, "Let's get this guy back to talk some more." A few others actually believe what Paul has said and stick with him.

Paul goes from Athens to Corinth. Paul keeps traveling through most of the known world for the rest of his life, as often as not causing uproars, continuing to tell people about this God and Jesus, the risen Christ, whom he himself had encountered, who changed his life, who is changing the world. Other people, too, spread the news of this God and Jesus, and of this new way of living

and being that Jesus modeled. Not everyone believes, but some do, enough so that this new Way spreads all over the world, all the way to Park Avenue.

Now it's our turn. *Not* to think we have the true religion or the right answers and everyone who believes differently is lesser. It's our turn to look honestly at ourselves. When we walk up Park Avenue or Madison or Fifth Avenue, or First Avenue or Atlantic Avenue or Bruckner Boulevard ... what shrines do we see? When we look around our own homes, around our own hearts, what altars do we find there? Have we set up altars to security, to comfort, to convenience, to pleasure, to prestige?

What are the most important things in our lives? Where do we focus our resources: our money, our time, our energy? How we answer these questions, if we dare to answer honestly, will tell us a lot about the gods we worship.

Now it's our turn to share, in a relevant and respectful way, this God. How do we do that, recognizing this may well be an unknown God to those we live with, and even to ourselves sometimes? How do we tell people about this God who made the world and everything in it? This God who has sought us out, and wants to be in relationship with us. This God in whom we can live and move and have our very being. This God revealed to us in the Christ, the incarnate One revealing the God who is with us and in us.

The One who says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And what are those commandments? Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. Love one another as I have loved you. Love.

I've just heard this morning that Pope Francis, during his visit to the Holy Land, has invited the Presidents of Palestine and Israel to come to the Vatican in June to restart the peace talks. They've both accepted. This makes me very excited and fills me with hope! What a great example of sharing this God.

God, help us to love. God, help us to keep trying.

Amen.

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