

Easter 6A: Acts 17:22-31  
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Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **Filling the God-Sized Hole**

I was spoiled, growing in Jacksonville. For, I lived not five miles from the Chamblin Bookmine, the best used bookstore outside of New York City. Chamblin is cavernous, the size of a supermarket, where you have to squeeze through narrow aisles between shelves crammed floor to ceiling with books of every subject you can imagine—romance novels, histories, children’s books, books on politics, gardening, philosophy, science fiction and the arts. What I find most interesting is naturally the “Religion” section—six full aisles of theological bargains. Of course, you have to sort through the trash to find the gems, and there are plenty of garbage theologies. But, I enjoy the challenge, the hunt, and I make a point to stop in whenever I’m in town.

Sadly, I haven’t found anything like Chamblin's here in Richmond. And I’ve been looking. One used bookstore I recently visited on Cary Street catered exclusively to children. Another just next door only sold books by or about people of color or queer people. Just down the road from there was a store that claimed to be bookstore but was in fact a kind of New Age emporium, stocked full of crystals, incense, candles, oils, and Tibetan singing bowls. There was only one small bookcase of books...on how to use the other items they sold. Over near VCU, two of the used bookstores Google listed were closed, so I stopped into the Barnes and Noble. Knowing the store was frequented by students, I was curious to see what they had on offer. In the Religion section, I found a modest collection of Bibles, a handful of books by the Pope and CS Lewis, and several books that are only tangentially related to religion. Next to these were books on world religions—Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and even a whole shelf dedicated to atheism, as odd as that might sound. I guess you could argue they were offering equal opportunity to every belief system. Except that when I turned around, I found a whole other section titled “Mind/Body/Spirit.” This section was easily twice the size of the Religion section, and consisted of books of a wholly other kind of belief— books on spells and witchcraft, tarot cards and astrology, wicca and transcendentalism, stuff that used to be hidden away in the back of shops, but here was on full display.

Now, we can criticize and condemn these books as superstition and idolatry. And we can shake our heads at publishers’ shameless efforts to cash in on the mysticism fad. And we would be justified to do so. But, another approach, a better approach, might be to ask, Why? Why are people interested in this stuff? What’s behind it? That’s what I asked myself when I saw these books. What hunger or need do they feed? And how can the church better address it? I mean, we may not like how it is expressed, but at least these readers are seeking, at least they’re open to a reality other than this one, other than themselves.

St. Paul in our first lesson this morning takes this approach with the people of Athens. Athens, in Paul’s day, was a cultural capital of the Mediterranean, the location of the majestic Parthenon and the ancient home of the philosopher Plato and Zeno, the founder of Stoic philosophy. Paul is there to meet up with some mission partners and in the meanwhile bides his time playing tourist,

visiting Athens' magnificent buildings, listening to their poets and philosophers and taking in their many temples. And so, when asked, he is able to engage the leading thinkers of the city not by citing Scripture but by appealing to their culture. Standing in the Areopagus, the square where philosophers gathered to debate, Paul starts off by commending their public piety: "Athenians! I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at your shrines, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'"

The Athenians, Paul recognizes, are a very 'spiritual people.' They had altars to hundreds of gods, and even one devoted to a god they couldn't identify. (They didn't want to offend any deity just because they didn't know its name.) This sounds like a uniquely ancient problem, but I once saw a car that had a rabbit's foot hanging from the ignition, a Sacred Heart Jesus air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror, a bobblehead Buddha on the dashboard and a Darwin "fish with feet" emblem on the trunk! The driver was evidently keen on covering all his bases!

Now, we might make fun of the crass idolatry evident here, and might expect Paul, a devout Jew, to do the same with the Athenians, launching into them for their blatant idolatry but Paul instead commends them for their groping for God, for reaching for an experience of the divine, however misguided it may be.

Paul's approach here at the Areopagus presents a challenge to us today. You see, for generations, Christianity has been the dominant religion in our country and in the West in general, and so we've come to expect that the laws and customs of the land would uphold Christian beliefs and values, or at least not undermine them. But now, as participation in religion has declined, and the church is increasingly seen as fringe, and that which had been considered fringe—astrology, magic, tarot cards—has become mainstream, we find ourselves in a very different position than before, a position more like that of Paul in Athens, speaking as outsiders to the culture that is hostile and dismissive of our faith. In such a situation, the approach Paul takes, commending the Athenians for their religiosity rather than railing against their idolatry, warrants our attention and our emulation.

I know this doesn't come naturally to many of us, and a lot of us wouldn't know where to start in speaking to others about God. So let me share with you four places, four angles we might take in engaging with non-believers. These come from NT Wright's book, *Simply Christian*. Wright, an English bishop and New Testament scholar, suggests that the call of God can be discerned in each of us, in our hearts, in our deepest desires—in our hunger for justice, in our longing for spirituality, for transcendence, in our need for relationship, for intimacy, and in our delight in beauty. Justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty. Wright calls these four yearnings "echoes of a voice," ways in which God's existence is known to us by his absence, by the feeling that something is missing in us, in the "holy ache" we sense within, a spiritual hurt that points us towards God. We have this ache because God made us for himself, and we feel his absence, even when we don't have a name for him, even when he remains an "unknown God."

Wright's idea of divine "echoes" is helpful, I think, in identifying these God-given, God-revealing desires. For, with this interpretation in mind, we can acknowledge the recent interest in astrology and tarot cards as indicating a longing for spirituality, for a deeper reality than what we

can see and touch. And we can affirm the hunger for justice that is behind radical political activism today, that fuels the demand for social justice, racial equity and climate change amelioration. At the same time, we can acknowledge the appeal of activist groups as they also offer participants a sense of community, of being part of something larger, which is a need we all have, the need for relationship. And we can respect the reverence for beauty that undergirds the commitment to protect the scenic outdoors and the impulse to make music and art, even when the music or art is not to our tastes.

Now, let me be clear, to recognize the God-given longings at the root of people's interest in spirituality, activism and art, is to say nothing of the rightness or adequateness of those activities. It says nothing about whether the solidarity experienced by activists constitutes real community or just convenient collaboration, or whether magic and crystals add any real transcendence to our lives, or whether an appreciation of art and nature necessarily opens us up to the Source of beauty or whether it stays superficial, skin deep. I offer these examples only to suggest how we Christians might be able to meet those outside the church where they are, just like St. Paul did with the Athenians on the Areopagus.

Indeed, as Paul's own speech shows, sharing the Gospel with non-believers *begins* with listening to their story, to how God is calling them in their lives. But it *should* lead us to calling out how a lot of our behaviors, our self-generated responses to the deep needs God has placed within us, inevitably fall short and leave us empty and unfulfilled in the end. I mean, at some point in the conversation, we have to address this, have to speak to how we miss the source of our deep desires when we fixate on what is really just a distraction, how we are still making sacrifices to idols, pouring our ambitions and our passions upon a thousand altars—wealth, position, power, pleasure, and security in all their forms—even when we sense, when we know they're not enough. That they just don't fill the hole inside of us.

Nicky Gumble, the presenter of the *Alpha Series*, tells of a conversation he had with one of the participants. She said that in her country, people speak of having two stomachs, one for meat and vegetables and potatoes and another for rice. No matter how much meat and veggies a person eats, they never feel full; not until they've eaten rice do they feel satisfied. It's like that for us too. We can fill our lives, our "stomachs," with all sorts of everyday things—family, jobs, hobbies, recreational activities, charity work. But they will never be able to fill the other "stomach" we have, for we have a God-size hole in our hearts and it can only be filled with God. Nothing else can satisfy. St. Augustine of Hippo wrote of God, "You made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

If we need any evidence that this was so, we have only to look at the restlessness that characterizes so many of the ills we suffer today—commitment-free sex and widespread loneliness, the epidemic of anxiety among young people and mental health problems in general, rampant drug use and violence. Not too far from the "Mind/Body/Soul" section in the bookstore are shelves lined with book after book on dealing with addictions to all manner of things: alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, video games, pornography, and food. These too are a sign of our deep longing for God. Spiritually speaking, addiction is the result of trying to fill that God-shaped hole with something other than God, attempting to assuage that ache with that which cannot satisfy.

Only God, the God of the universe who created all things, who made the human race in His image, only *that* God can satisfy our deep longings. While the world is ignorant of this God, as Paul says, He is the one ‘in whom we live and move and have our being.’ Moreover, He is not hiding himself, but rather can be known, *is* known. For he has revealed himself in a man, Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus is a historical figure—that he lived and died is a matter of historical record—and his resurrection three days later, we believe, has changed everything, everything about our place in this world, about our relationship with God, about how we are to relate to others. And so acknowledging, accepting this God involves more than just adding ‘God’ to our already full lives, adding yet another altar to the already crowded temples of our hearts. This God wants greater things for us than happiness, expects greater things for us than to be good, nice and kind people. He wants a relationship with us, and he wants us to invite others into relationship with him too.

Now, we don’t have to be afraid of this, of telling others about the God we know, because sharing our faith is not about “imposing our beliefs” on others. It is about giving “an account of the hope that is in you,” as Peter says in our second lesson. And the manner in which we are to express our hope, Peter argues, is to be characterized not by power and manipulation, but instead by “gentleness and reverence.” As I said, we Christians are on the outside now and cannot expect others to recognize the authority of the church. But that is not a problem, because the Good News is not a rule to be imposed but a gift that has been given to us to share with others, that they might know God, the One who fills the hole within us, who satisfies our hunger for relationship, who calms our restless hearts, and answers our search for meaning. This is the God whom we know and whom we pray others will know as well. And blessed be his name! Amen.