

SOMETHING NEW IN SOMETHING OLD

Acts 17:22-31; Sixth Sunday of Easter, a

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Prayer

O God, take these age old words of scripture, and open our hearts and minds so that we might find something new, that was already there. In Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Acts 17:22-31

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." **29** Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. **30** While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

"At the end of all our exploring," wrote T. S. Elliot in *Little Gidding*, "we arrive where we started and know it for the first time." It is a poetic way of saying that sometimes the most obvious, the simplest things are at the same time the most profound things and that we leave home and start exploring, sometimes search for all of our lives for something we never find, only to return at the end and find that for which we have been searching all along.

Might that be the key to the universal and enduring appeal of the Wizard of Oz? At the end, the tin man, the cowardly lion, and the scarecrow all find that in the acts of compassion, courage, and intellect that they have used on the way to the great wizard show that these are qualities that they already possess? And that Dorothy has never really been far away from where she wants to be, remembering that there is no place like home.

I am thinking that there is something new in the air of what it means to be a Christian in the year 2011. I'm not alone in that thinking. Phyllis Tickle, that well-read and well-respected Christian author, has suggested that every 500 years there is a massive shift in Christianity.¹ The last great change was in the Protestant Reformation; and she posits that we are in the midst of something new today, though like the other changes that

developed, we don't know all of what that means or what the church will look like when it settles. But I wonder if that something new might not be really new; or might be something that has been in front of us all along.

For example, we have entered a new era in trying to understand the faith that our Islamic brothers and sisters affirm. Are you aware that the Arabic word for "God" is "Allah?" So that the book of Genesis in the Arabic Bible begins "In the beginning, Allah created..." And that the Old and New Testaments in Arabic are replete with the word: whether Orthodox, Coptic, Evangelical, or Reformed Christian in the Middle East, they worship Allah.

One reason that we have entered this new era is, of course, that we live in a post- 9/11 world; and though strides have been made in our dialogues (pride prevents me from sharing how Idlewild and the Memphis Islamic Center charted new ground in this!) one only has to read a few letters to the editor to see just how much sheer ignorance there is about the basics of Muslim thought, belief, and practice.

But the other reason that we have entered a new era in inter-faith understanding is that the question is no longer purely academic. Whereas the world has always been a wondrously diverse home to many religions, it has only been recently that, for example, there are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians; more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Several weeks ago our friend Gary Gunderson of Methodist LeBonheur wrote an op-ed piece in *The Commercial Appeal* suggesting that Memphis would not be the medical center we are if it were not for the remarkable, skilled doctors at St. Jude and elsewhere who happen to be Muslim.

And hitting very close to home, in just a few weeks my nephew, son of not one but two Presbyterian (USA) ministers, a graduate of one of our Presbyterian colleges, will be marrying a beautiful young woman from Kazakhstan who, you guessed it, is Muslim. Thoroughly American, after four years of study at the University of Arizona, but Muslim.

The second shift I have noticed is happening within our own Christian community. Something new. As denominations struggle to discover new ways to be the church, new partnerships are being formed between Christians who share a common sense of mission. There are evangelicals like Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo who have graciously reached across the old conservative-liberal theological divide to make common cause with others who work for peace and justice.

Here in Memphis, who would have thought ten years ago that it would be Craig Strickland, the pastor of the Hope Presbyterian Church in Cordova (a decidedly more evangelical church) and a good friend of mine, who would have thought that Craig would have been one of the leaders to bring together Jewish and Christian, black and white pastors and congregations, to provide help for those who might be evacuated from the floods. Who would have thought it?

And there is something newer within that greater evangelical community that recently hit it like a bombshell. Rob Bell has been the darling of young evangelicals for over a decade as is evidenced by the 10,000 weekly worshippers at his Mars Hill church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I first heard about him through one of my nephews, another son of another brother who is a Presbyterian (USA) minister.

Bell recently came out with a book entitled *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.² Sales have risen meteorically, due in no small part to national magazines devoting cover stories to the controversy this has caused in the more conservative evangelical pockets. Why? He gives a clue about his thesis on the very first page when he describes an art show in his church when he had been giving a series of talks on peacemaking, and he asked artists to display their paintings and poems that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which, he says, a number of people found compelling. But not everyone.

Someone attached a piece of paper to it. On the piece of paper was written: "Reality check: He's in hell."

Bell writes: "Really? Gandhi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?"³ In an easy to read style he then focuses on our perceptions of God, striking a chord in readers who feel a strong resonance with Bell's principal claim that love wins in the end and that he refuses to limit how far Christ's redemptive love can reach.

That's something new, or is it? Has it been in front of us all along?

In or around the year 55 in the Common Era Paul made a speech at the Areopagas (also called, incidentally, Mars Hill!) in Athens. As Luke tells the story, one can almost feel the tension if one has a sense of history, for it was over four centuries earlier that Socrates had spoken in the marketplace to everyone, introducing new gods. Socrates' appearance before an Athenian court lead to a sentence of death.⁴ In addition, Paul had just been ridden out of town on a rail in Thessalonica and Beroea. This was new territory for him, and its my guess he felt some anxiety.

His speech is fascinating. Rather than berating his listeners as Stephen did in last week's lesson (Paul didn't call his audience a bunch of "stiff necked people!" He might have ended up like Stephen or Socrates!), he accommodates his listeners, acknowledges their interest in religion and theology. He lets them know that he has observed their culture and listened to their culture, hearing deep within it aspects of the ways people are seeking and searching for the one true God. He finds common ground with them, by reading carefully the signs of theological problems and possibilities within the dominant culture. He didn't criticize them from the start, but had a spirit of intellectual and theo-

logical hospitality, which invited them to go a bit further with him as he began to talk about what the uniqueness of Christ's resurrection meant.

We think that's new today as we study and partner with people of other faiths and cultures? Go back to the Bible! It's what Paul was doing.

He notices all the altars in the city, a sign of their deep spirituality, and notices one in particular that catches his attention. He names it: The altar to the unknown God. Paul knows his Greek philosophy enough to use it in his argument. He refers to God as one "in whom we live and move and have our being." That is how we address God often in our prayers. It describes God in a way that fits our perception of God. What most of us don't realize is that Paul borrowed that phrase from a 6th century B.C.E. philosopher by the name of Epimenides of Crete. "We too are his offspring," he says. He took that phrase from the philosopher Aratus of Soli, who three centuries earlier said the same thing about Zeus: "We are his offspring."⁵

Paul acknowledges that because they have an altar to an unknown god, it shows that they know that God can never be limited by something human beings construct, which puts them on common ground with a basic premise of Judaism and Christianity, namely, that there can be no idols because idols limit God, and God cannot be limited—not by an idol made of wood or stone, not by a temple, not by a creed, not by a theology, not by a church!⁶

What does all of this have to do with the spiritual times in which we live? Two suggestions: One is to notice how Paul embraced a theological modesty. We would do well to follow his example, because no one has all the truth. It is to acknowledge that we put our ultimate trust in God, not things people have said about God.⁷

This is Rob Bell's thesis. There are some things that we need to reject, not about Jesus, but about what people have said about Jesus and the narrowness of his mission. In another one of his pithy but poignant little comments he writes what he has heard from other Christians: "God loves us. God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless you do not respond the right way. Then God will torture you forever. In hell." "Huh? Bell asks.

It sounds new when Rob Bell says that we need to put our ultimate trust in God and Jesus Christ, whose grace is beyond our understanding, but it is as old as Paul, actually, even older if we consider our Judaic and Greek spiritual genealogies.

Secondly, if we take Paul's example seriously here, we need to be open to the truth other people and other religions know. Shirley Guthrie, of blessed memory wrote of the way that the interpretation of John 14:6 ("I am the way, the truth, and the life") has been taken to mean that because Jesus is the only way to salvation, Christianity is the only true religion. And that has led all too often, to theological arrogance and intolerance.

Rather, Guthrie suggests that if we believe in a risen and living Christ who has been and is at work outside our Christian circle, we will know that we do not have to “take” Christ to people of other religious traditions: “we go to *meet* him in our encounters with them. We will expect and gladly welcome evidence that the grace and truth we have come to know in him has reached into their lives too. We will be glad to hear them saying things about their God and their faith that sound remarkably similar to what we say about our God and our faith. The truth we seek in inter-religious dialogue is not our truth but *God’s* truth.”⁸ Sounds like Paul, doesn’t it?

Can you imagine a more ... exhilarating time to be a Christian? With something new in the air in what it means to be a Christian? Oh, I know ... there are Christians who burn Korans and try to scare people into faith and scapegoat non-Christians and gays and the poor and others for all the problems we have these days. And we ourselves sometimes settle for lesser gods in this life, and search for the gods of our own design. We construct our own temples and doctrines, and bow before earthly things and vest them with heavenly power. And all to no avail. For God who made the world and everything in it is Lord of heaven and earth, and does not dwell in shrines or temples made with human hands or in human minds. For in God we live and move and have our being.

And so we explore the riches within our scripture and tradition and translate them into the exciting context in which we live. How exhilarating! But at the end of all our exploring we arrive where we started and know it for the first time. It was there all along. A big and generous and gracious God. And so our task is to fashion a church as big and generous as God’s grace!

To the God once unknown, now known to us all, be all glory and honor, wisdom and strength, both now and forever. Amen.

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¹ Phyllis Tickle, *he Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why.*, Baker Books, 2008.

² Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.* New York: HarperOne, 2011.

³ *Ibid*, p.1.

⁴ Randle Mixon, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume Two*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 2011, p. 477.

⁵ Beverly Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching, Year A*, Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1995, p. 302.

⁶ John Buchanan, “Is Our Way the Only Way?” , May 5, 2002, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3

⁸ Shirley Guthrie, “The Way, the Truth, and the Life,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 11, 2002