

“The Sovereign Hand of God” CHC 5-21-17

Old Testament, Psalm 66:1-12

New Testament, Acts 17:22-31

Through the years my concept of how I understand the nature and character of is in constant flux. This is important because my image of God directly influences how I relate to myself and others. For years I was unaware that I viewed God as someone judging me according to my personal effort to perform. My theological beliefs articulated that God was accepting and operated on the premise of grace and could easily preach that truth. But my emotional understanding and practice contradicted my head understanding. It is often all very subtle until we begin to explore what we say we believe and how we act and understand God.

My knowledge of and experience of God will determine how I treat others. If I am critical and judgmental chances are that is how I feel God is with me. What often most shapes our experiencing and understanding of God are life’s difficult experiences and how they are processed.

A documentary on the life of David Gleason, a professional football player with the New Orleans Saints, allows us to follow his journey with ALS. In the initial stages of his illness he expresses anger with God. He feels that if God really loves him and cares about him this would not have happened. Married, and his wife expecting, a successful football player, the world seems good. However, upon being diagnosed with ALS, he is presented an opportunity to deal with God and his soul. He goes to a faith healer which proves disappointing. His father, concerned about his soul keeps pushing the acceptance of Jesus on him. Though much is both said and left unsaid, by the end of his life one could ascertain an acceptance of God’s presence and grace as he tells his father that “my soul is okay”.

Wendell Berry writes that “It may be that when we no longer know which way to go that we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings” (Homiletics, May-June, 2017, p.17, Berry, “Poetry and Marriage” in ‘Standing by Words: Essays).

As we find Paul standing before Greek philosophers and citizens in the Areopagus in Athens, Paul is engaging them with his own experience and understanding of God. He appeals to their religious inquisitiveness seen in their objects of worship and the particular inscription on an altar reading, “To an unknown god”.

People like to cover their religious bases. The novel, and movie, “Life of Pi”, takes a unique approach to this way of connecting with the god of all major religions.

Before Paul stand the Epicurians who live in austerity, secluded from civic affairs, who believe that philosophical discussion leads to happiness. Among them we find the Stoics advocating virtue based on knowledge, self-sufficiency, reason, and devotion to duty. In antiquity discussion of new ideas is welcomed. However, new ideas are not quickly embraced. As with us all, traditional ideas and ways of thinking are not given up easily.

So Paul, speaking to the crowd, begins, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you". He speaks to the sovereignty of God as one who is creator, yet stands independent of the created world, not bound by human shrines and hand fashioned idols, but as the one who "gives to all mortals life and breath and all things as though he needed anything". It is this God who makes all nations and races of people, sets their boundaries, and allots limits to life's existence. Why? So within the context of our lives we might search for God, even desire to seek and find God. St. Augustine put it this way, "The soul is restless until it finds its rest in God". Even within the struggle and nature of our search Paul points out that God, who is transcendent, is nevertheless "not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being".

Years ago, in 1958, a 14 year old British boy, Laurie London, expressed this truth in the only gospel song that ever has reached number one on the U.S. single pop chart. You know it. "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands".

This is a far cry from the confident Paul who believed God sent him to persecute Christians. This is not the Paul who, in the confidence of the ego and the flesh, said to the Philippians, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless". We witness a man here fully centered upon himself and not God.

All that changed the day, on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians for the worship of Christ, Jesus meets him. As told by Luke, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:4-5).

His entire understanding and experience of God is now understood in God's revelation of Godself in the face and person of Jesus Christ. Humbled, embracing an entirely new apprehension of who God is, he can say, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I have suffered everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:7-8).

C.S. Lewis similarly frames his own experience and understanding of God in reference to the self; "Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked---the whole outfit, I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours" (Lewis, "Mere Christianity").

This is the God Paul proclaims to these Athenians and us today. God has a face, is a person, will call us to account through the judgment and grace of Jesus Christ, and offer the promise of resurrection to those who humble themselves and embrace God's righteousness in Him. God has boundaries and limits for human behavior, but in Christ we enter into the full riches of God's universal love and grace. Jesus is both our judge and redeemer.

Paul tells them that their altar to the unknown God demonstrates their yearning to worship. However, he wants to tell them who to worship. All life is in God's hands. See in Christ both God's mystery and incomprehensibility as well as God's nearness, God's very presence with us.

I imagine a creative setting in modern America. Paul is preaching in a Starbucks. Come with me to hear what he might say to our contemporaries: "Americans, I see how religious you are, in every way. I have observed how many of you are fond of saying, 'I'm spiritual, not religious'. I am aware how increasing numbers of you never cross the threshold of a church or synagogue or even a mosque, but spend hours browsing religious books at Barnes and Noble. Many of you wear crosses around your necks, but hardly know why. You finger them in moments of fear or anxiety and feel vaguely comforted. You sit at home, channel surfing the televangelists and religious talk shows, hoping to glean some spiritual comfort. You have an instant curiosity about things religious, and vow that one day you will do something about it. But somehow you never find the time" (Homiletics, p.26).

Just as it is today, when Paul focused on the life, death, and resurrection in Jesus Christ as God's revelation of Godself, challenging them to believe and receive God's gift of grace in Him, some scoffed. Others said that we will think about it. However, "some of them joined him and became believers". When we take that humble step toward God in faith, we change. God and the world look different.

Paul focuses our journey of faith on the person of Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God", as Paul writes to the Colossians. The end point of our journey of faith as we go through the mountains and valleys of life is to know and experience God in the person of Jesus Christ, our resurrected Lord.

In Rodin's sculpture, 'The Hand of God', there is an image of our creative communion with God. The hand of God is massive. It is strong. God's creative action of inanimate and animate matter, yet God's independence from that creation, neither requiring human agency nor catering to it for divine purposes, reflects ultimate control.

What we observe, however, is that the creature formed by the hand of God is fluid. It appears that this human life shifts and moves within the hand of God and as it does, the hand which holds this creature, adjusts, and shapes it as the creature shapes itself.

"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you", Paul preaches. The mystery, which is God in Jesus Christ, meets us in the various experiences and contexts of life, shaping us and breathing into us the breath of life (Homiletics, p.28, Samuel Alexander, "Rodin's 'Hand of God'", Patheos.com, 4-23-12).