

For all the issues that many Christian theologians, including myself, have with the theology of the Apostle Paul, this story speaks to one of Paul's useful spiritual gifts. The apostle has clearly spent time in Athens, observing Greek culture, noticing the way they express their devotion to gods, and grasping the importance they place on intellectual dialogue as a means for gaining wisdom and enlightenment.

One instrument of this tradition were the regular gatherings that occurred at a large outcropping of rock near the Acropolis and Agora-marketplace. Depending on one's Greek or Roman background, it was called either the Areopagus or Mars Hill. The place served as a significant meeting place for a variety of gatherings, most notably for forums that invited the sharing of ideas.

It is likely that Paul attended a few of these, first as an observant listener, and then with the intent of sharing his message about the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul walked around the city, he absorbed and processed all that he saw and heard, formulating the notes that would feed his talking points.

When the opportunity arose, he began as any skilled guest orator will do by complementing the people of Athens on the strengths of their intellect and curiosity, and on the skilled artisanship depicting their beliefs. Illustrating his appreciation of their culture, he named statues and quoted sayings that caught his eye and ear.

- An altar bearing the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’
- A quote from a sixth-century BCE writer, Epimenides of Crete, who acknowledged that it was in the unnamed Deity that they ‘live and move and have our being.’
- Finally, he co-opted for his purposes a line from a popular poem on astronomy and meteorology entitled *Phaenomena* by the Stoic, Aratus, “Everywhere we all need Zeus, for we are also his offspring.”

Paul blends these cultural icons by saying in effect, “I am now going to tell you about the God of whom you are only vaguely aware.”

First, this God is the creator of the cosmos.

Second, this God so transcends human life that (unlike certain of the Greek deities) this One is independent of any need for human support.

Third, this Deity is the Lord of all life, not only as creator, but also as the giver, shaper and sustainer of human existence.

Fourth, the human dependence on this Deity has resulted in a universal quest for God (the implication being that the Greeks’ altar ‘To an unknown god’ is evidence of this quest), a God who is nearer to us than we sometimes suppose.

Lastly, as humans, we relate to this Deity as children to a parent, a fact that some Greek thinkers have already acknowledged. That’s when Paul played his observation cards of the sayings: “In this God we live and move and have our being” and “For we too are his offspring.”

Although the name of Jesus never appears, it is quite clear that Jesus is the centerpiece of Paul’s thought and that the Easter event is, for him, the primary

FACT of human history: Jesus, and the resurrection of the Christ, are central to Jew and to Greek, to man and to woman, to ancient and to modern!

I love the way one of my commentaries summed up this speech of Paul's: "Thus, Acts 17:22-31, *while dressed in Greek attire*, is that same essential proclamation" as the others that have preceded it in the book of Acts as we bear witness to, as Pat proclaimed in bible study, "the release of the Christian faith" into the world.

(Much of this is either directly quoted or paraphrased from *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A, Sixth Sunday of Easter*)

And how is it that these people of diverse backgrounds all muster the courage, faith and fortitude to offer these confident messages – in front of complete strangers, no less?

Pat brought up something in bible study that I hadn't really thought about. While it took Simon Peter and the other men who followed Jesus three years to fully believe Jesus was who he said he was, it took Saul three DAYS to confess Christ as Savior, and to be baptized. Then, Acts 9 tells us, "(f)or several days (Saul) was with the disciples in Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ... 22 Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah."

How is what took three years for some (that is, faith in Jesus as God's Anointed One) accomplished in a matter of days for another?

This is what we learn in the reading from John's gospel. As Jesus was in his last few days with the OG disciples, he knew they were not feeling fully equipped to carry his message beyond Christ's departure. They were afraid of facing life without Jesus. I recall an instance when I was a child and I was separated from my parent in a department store. I had that very visceral moment when I was afraid I would never find them, and I would be lost forever. Do you know that feeling?

Jesus addresses this very feeling with his disciples. "I will not leave you orphaned," he promises them. "I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

In a world that only recognizes carnal realities – that is, only recognizes life as breath, blood, and flesh – this statement of Jesus makes little sense. There's a word in Hebrew that is difficult to translate into English – it is נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*). Within this word contains all the elements that constitute life. All the systems that animate our bodies (breath, blood, heart, mind, electricity, feeling, emotion) are contained in *nephesh*. Also, that which enables us to connect with other parts of God's creation in a mystical way – soul to soul.

In the New Testament, Jesus carries the understanding of *nephesh* into his promise of what will be left to his disciples after he leaves them in bodily form. In John he tells them, "16 I will ask the One who sent me to give you another *Paraclete*, another Helper, to be with you always – 17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but

you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you.”

This word, *Paraclete*, is a Greek word that has been translated in many ways: advocate, helper, comforter, or, in the First Nations Version, “one who will always walk beside you and guide you *on the good road*.” And that’s a great translation; the word breaks down into “one who has been called/invited to come alongside.” {As a note, the word *Paraclete* is not gender-specific, nor is the pronoun *autos* that follows it. While it is often rendered “he/him” leading many to assume this “Spirit of Truth” is masculine, using she/her pronouns are just as appropriate. On this day when Americans celebrate mothers, it is fair to consider the “one who will walk beside you and guide you on the good road” in this light. But it is also a good translation any day of the year 😊 }

So, while Jesus has told his followers that in a short time they will no longer know him in the human form they recognize, the *nephesh*, the essence will still be with them – and in a powerful way. Right? This is what Saul encountered on the road to Damascus, that completely turned his life around, and gave him the power to preach with authority that Jesus was the Messiah.

But this gift wasn’t just for “special” people like Saul, or Peter, or Mary, or Lydia. This *Paraclete* is also offered for any who claim the good news offered through Christ Jesus. A line in the African-American spiritual “There Is a Balm in Gilead” says “If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus, and say, ‘He died for all.’”

In my sermon title I made light of this strange Greek word, *Paraclete*; how “Jesus Promised a Pair of Cleats or a Parakeet, or Something Like That.” But honestly the gift of the *Paraclete* can be found just about anywhere “the love of Jesus” abounds.

Bob Riser has borne witness to the powerful fellowship that he has found in football locker rooms – the love shared between teammates as they literally lace up their cleats.

So many of us find a bond of kinship between ourselves and the animals that share our lives. When we celebrated the life of Mr. Penn’s wife, Lyn, a week ago, so much was made of the reciprocal affinity that she shared with animals whether parakeets or macaws, dogs, turtles, or even an alligator.

But one of the most powerful expressions of the *Paraclete*’s presence is the worshiping community. As we read a couple of weeks ago, the early Christian community put together the formula for a body of people to invite the *Paraclete* to be an active member of their community. In chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke writes:

44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being made whole.

The Spirit of Christ binds us together. In our relationships we bring it alive! Jesus' words in John's gospel are bookended with Jesus sharing this bond through love.

It begins, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

And it ends "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my (Holy Parent), and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

When we love one another, we reveal Christ in the world. And when we ourselves are feeling lost and adrift, the very Spirit of Christ is the one to whom we can moor. The Apostle Paul was right, the Living Christ is the one in whom we can live and move and have our being - together.

Thanks be to the God of everlasting love and life. Amen.