

John 14:15-21

14:15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

14:16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

14:17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

14:18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

14:19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

14:20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

14:21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Paul and Silas have been sailing while sharing the good news with those throughout the Roman Empire. They are on the run having been kicked out from Thessalonica and Berea. They flee for their safety and end up in Athens, a University town. Here Paul is distressed by all the idols to the gods. He is debating Jews, Stoics, and Epicurean Philosophers. Then he stands up to preach. Listen

Acts 17:22-31

17:22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

17:23 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.

17:24 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,

17:25 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.

17:26 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,

17:27 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.

17:28 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.'

17:29 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.

17:30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

17:31 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."

Proclamation of the Word

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and the crowning glory was the creation of humankind. You and I were made in God's image according to Genesis 2.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "God created us in his image then we decided to return the favor." We have been creating God in our image since the beginning of time. Paul flees to Athens and notices all the idols. Paul declares, "It is a junkyard of idols."

A very wise children's book entitled *Old Turtleⁱ* deals with the dilemma of making God in our own image. The stone knows God as "a great rock that never moves." The wind whispers, "He is the wind who is never still." "She is a great tree," murmured the willow, "a part of the world, always growing, always giving." and so on. Each begins to argue about how God is exactly, but they only see in part. Each created being sees God as like itself. The argument grows louder and louder Until Old Turtle yells STOP! Old Turtle never said anything and certainly never argued about God. The Turtle spoke:

"God is indeed deep, she said to the fish in the sea; "and much higher than high," she told the mountain.

"He is swift and free as the wind, and still and solid as a great rock," she said to the breezes and stones.

"She is the life of the world." Turtle said to the willow. "Always close by, yet beyond the farthest twinkling light," she told the ant and the star.

"God is gentle and powerful. Above all things and within all things."

"God is all we dream of, and all that we seek." said Old Turtle, "All that we come from and all that we can find."

"God IS."

The search for God may begin with looking around us and at ourselves, at what we can observe or experience, but we must always beware of making God in our own image.

This is where we find the Apostle Paul in scripture. He is on the run and has taken a layover in the university town of Athens. He is waiting for Timothy and Silas to catch up. In the waiting, he decides to take in the sights. The ancient Greek city, home to curious intellectuals and years before, the likes of Plato and Socrates, is overrun with statutes to each and every god one can imagine. And just in case, they may have left one out, there is one marked "to an unknown god." I suppose the locals want to cover all bases, make sure they have cited all their sources, give credit to all, like good researchers and scholars should. On worshiping graven images and idols, Jenny Williams writes,

If the gods of their other altars or shrines fail them, perhaps an "as-yet-unnamed" deity will look favorably upon them. Though this sounds like an ancient problem, I've seen a similar sight in southern California. There you can get into a car that has a rabbit's foot sitting in the cup holder, a sacred heart air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror, a bobblehead Buddha sitting on the dashboard and a Darwin "fish with feet" emblem on the trunk.ⁱⁱ

She is describing a car shrine in California, but read the bumper stickers on a car parked in Clemson and you may see the same thing. I can see Paul taking up this debate in the Amphitheater or sitting in study groups discussing the same. If I had to guess, Clemson University has perhaps one of the most religious student bodies there is. For some young adults, college is a time for searching, pursuing purpose and meaning. Every form of Christianity can be found here, as well, a people who practice all major world religions. A person can practice faith and pursue an education, too. God is in all the stuff and matter of life. Freedom to practice our faith is a founding principal of our nation and something for which we can give thanks this Memorial weekend.

The intellectual search for God can be a groping after God, too. When he was Dean of Duke Chapel, Will Willimon tells the story of the undergrad who complained about her college's Religion Department, which included four professors who taught courses in everything from Hindu beliefs to Christian history. "The know a great deal about many things in religion, " she said, "but none of them in the department are practitioners of any particular faith. I find that strange. The know everything about God except God."ⁱⁱⁱ

Maybe you have been on a life-long search for God or just recently discovered a longing to know God. Maybe God is more of a question mark and you marvel at those who seem so sure and confident of faith, whose faith seems to end with a period- closed, finished, complete. Or maybe like the Athenians, your gods have been your pursuits for knowledge or security or status. The Apostle Paul is a man who search for God began as a religious law-keeper. All that changed when he had a blinding conversion on the road to Damascus. After pursuing all righteousness, God almighty in the person of Jesus Christ, reached out and found Paul. Ever since, he has been witnessing to others about God. Paul finds himself debating in the middle of town Amphitheater. They call him a Babblor, bodily resurrection must sound strange to Greeks who believe in the immortality of the soul. Listen again to Paul's testimony:

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, 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. 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, 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. For 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:24-28)

God is like the water we swim in and the air we breathe. God is everywhere present. Marcus Borg^{iv} has a word to describe this- *pan-en-theism*- all in God. Not pantheism - God in everything, but everything exists in God. We live in the heart of God. Or to quote Paul, "In him we live and move and have our being."

Many years ago Bette Midler sang a hit song, "From a Distance." (1990) The refrain repeats, "God is watching us...from a distance." As if God is totally OTHER and disconnected from creation and the universe, but the biblical witness is different. God IS. God is life and energy and presence.

Jesus connects himself with Yahweh, the great "I AM" in all his I AM statements- I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the way, the truth, and the life. And today in the gospel according to John, Jesus talks of abiding in God. Jesus says, *"This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me;*

because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." (John 14:18-20)

I am in my Father, and you in me, I in you. We live in the heart of God. And through the power of the Spirit, God lives in us. All life connected.

That is why Christians care about creatures and creation, lest we make an idols of ourselves, humanity.

That is why Christians care about neighbors from all corners of the earth because whether they know it or claim it, we know the universe lives in God and God created all.

That is why we pray for our own nation this Memorial weekend and remember those who have died in service to others, but we also pray for all nations of the earth.

Paul ends his speech with a call to repentance and a reminder that God is the one who judges the quick and the dead. Perhaps one way we can repent is to realize that none of us has a corner on understanding God or right living as Christ's disciple. Like the creatures in Old Turtle's world, we each see a piece of the larger truth of God. And as followers of Jesus, we must respect other Christians for what they add to the conversation.

Even if you love to read Marcus Borg while your friend loves to read the *Left Behind* series, we know God's image is reflected in him or her.

Maybe the critical social issue for some is abortion while for others it is justice for the poor- both worship the God who gives life and desires abundant life for all.

Since God is everywhere present and in him we live and move and have our being, maybe we can understand God better when we listen across denominational lines, theological lines, or even across the center aisle of the sanctuary.

Perhaps then we will stop worshiping the god we have created in our own image, and be awed by the mystery of the God who very simply, and yet profoundly IS.

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

ⁱ Douglas Wood, *Old Turtle*, (Pfeiffer-Hamilton: Duluth, MN, 1993).

ⁱⁱ Jenny Williams, "Idol Behavior" in the *Christian Century*, April 19, 2005, p. 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID, p. 19.

^{iv} Borg- the language of theology, this way of understanding God is known as panentheism. The Greek roots of the word explain its meaning: pan (everything) en (in) theos (God). We are in God. We live and move in God. God is not someone "out there," but a presence all around us. Read more at <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2000/03/How-We-Imagine-God-Matters.aspx?p=2#05Kar1CAUGTfkvE.99>