

The Sixth Sunday after Easter, 29 May 2011
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Last week we focused on knowing God, knowing Christ – on what that really means in our lives, challenging things to think about and to do.

This week we are reminded of love, that knowing God means loving God, that God's love is the context and pretext of our lives. Another big, challenging idea.

One could fairly become concerned that this might be all intellectually convoluted. Jesus' talk about being in the Father, and the Father in him, and the people in him, and so on can be very confusing as people try to sort out who is in whom and what that means anyway. And we have Saint Paul with the intellectual leaders of Athens, quoting popular ancient poets that we have never heard of, playing intellectual tricks on the people who regularly try to trip him up. It could make a person nervous – or make them want to tune out.

We do not tune out, however, because we recall the 'bottom line' – that it is all about love. When Jesus goes into that tangle of who is in whom, he is talking about love, that consuming relationship which ties us together so completely that we are no longer separated. In weddings, we speak about two people becoming one, because that is what love does, it weaves people together. And that is true not only of that kind of love. All love is connection.

Love is what enables us to truly know anyone and anything, because love opens our hearts and minds. I come to know my neighbor by loving him. I come to know members of my family by loving them. I come to know God by loving God. I come to know creation by loving it, opening my heart and mind to it.

When we say that we were created in the image of God – and then also say that God is love – we are saying that we are created to love, that this is the essence of our being and our calling.

In the Epistle, Peter writes "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." The 'hope that is in us' is that life and love we have from God which somehow shine out for other people to see. Living in love makes itself visible and makes people curious. And when people ask- why are you so peaceful, loving, helpful? – why do you pray? – why do you belong to a church? – why do you believe? – Peter says that we are to share, to try to explain, but not fiercely or with any sense of superiority, 'with gentleness and reverence' – that is, in a context of love for the ones who are asking.

Paul is often thought of as intellectually difficult, as angry, as hostile. But in today's incident in Athens, we see him living up to that ideal of living in love, and responding as Peter asks us to.

Paul has not been having an easy time. He has been set upon by mobs in various towns. He has been beaten and robbed and brought up on charges. His life spreading the Gospel has been very challenging. And now here he is in the intellectual and cultural capital of the Mediterranean world. Who knows what will happen here!

But he does not come in fearfully, or keep a low profile. Neither does he come in like a conqueror, scorning all that he sees as false or misguided. He comes with joy, he comes bearing the love of God for every person and community.

It is easy to imagine him walking around Athens, much as many of us have in our own time, in awe at the great art, the great political ideas, the amazing architecture, the wonderful literary tradition. And he talked to everyone everywhere. He started at the synagogue, as always, talking with the people who already knew the promises in the Hebrew scriptures so that he could show how those promises had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Then he went on to the agora, where he could encounter everyone, rich and poor, merchants and soldiers, politicians and slaves, priests and peasants.

Wherever he went, he engaged people in conversation, told them what he had experienced, talked with them about the meaning of life, talked about the love at the heart of everything. And as he walked, just like one of us, he looked at all the temples and public buildings, at the statues and inscriptions, the wonderful roads and plazas.

If you have had the opportunity to travel to Athens or any of the other great ancient cities of the world, you know what it is to be lost in wonder and amazement. To be in such a place is to experience our connection with countless generations of people. Paul felt that, and he put it in the context of the love he felt through his whole being, the love which created each of these people, as it created him, the love that was at that moment holding each of them in being. He knew that God loved every single person he saw. That Jesus died for every single person he saw. And so he loved them, too, and wanted to do what Peter wrote about: to share the hope that was in him – to let people know the love that surrounded them.

So Paul went to the most elite group of leaders in the city. Paul was highly educated and he knew the great Greek poets that were important in the intellectual life of Athens.

He had also read and thought about the religious practices he saw. He put all this knowledge and experience into the context of God's love and brought it to the Areopagus. These men were undoubtedly surprised that this itinerant foreign preacher, who had been arrested as a 'rabble rouser', would come to them at all. They were more surprised to find him quoting their own favorite poets in support of his argument, to find him explaining some of their own religious tradition in new ways – all with gentleness and respect.

Because Paul had a genuine love and respect for their traditions, as part of the efforts of God's beloved creatures striving to find meaning, he was able to communicate that – and people listened.

He came with courage, confidence, and openness to whatever he might find – an ideal emissary of Christ. He showed glimpses of God as known in the Hebrew tradition to be found in their own traditions. He gave us that favorite line about God 'in whom we live and move and have our being', which was in fact a quote from an ancient Greek writer, thus enriching our tradition.

The Paul we see wandering around Athens and talking to everyone seems to be a living example of someone who knows he is living in love, who understands that love created us, sustains us, and will not let us go. Because of that love he has experienced, he loves the world and the people he encounters.

And so some came to believe, that is to have this same loving relationship with God and the people of God. Some did not. Some thought he was crazy. There are no guarantees. But he fulfilled his calling.

As I was writing this sermon, a friend sent an email sharing some words from my favorite contemporary poet, Wendell Berry, who was speaking in Seattle on Tuesday, quoting my favorite scripture passage. He said: "You mustn't wish for another life. You mustn't want to be somebody else. What you must do is this: 'Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks.' And he went on to say, "I am not all the way capable of so much, but those are the right instructions." (Wendell Berry, speaking in Seattle, 24 May 2011)

That is exactly what Paul was doing, exactly what Peter is calling all of us to do. That is living in love, living in relationship with the God who is love, who tangles us all together in this web of love and wonder. Amen.