

UNCONFINED

John 14:15-21

Intro

Our opening passage reminds us, yet again, of how God wants us to live: by keeping the commandments of loving God and one another.

I know that at certain points I must sound like a broken record in regards to this theme, but as I moved through the week there were a couple of thoughts that came to mind.

First, these are lectionary passages that we selected by a group of Biblical scholars.

I suppose that rationale is akin to a child saying, "it wasn't me!" even as the chocolate is still on their lips and fingers (after all, I'm still the one who selects that particular passage).

However, the other thing that came to mind is that the reason that it shows up so often in the lectionary is for two reasons.

One, it really is that important to God in regards to how we live with God and with one another. And two, walking away from the way God would have us live is something that we, as humans, will do time and time and time again. We are sinners, sinful by nature, and we need to constantly be reminded of who God wants us to be.

It is that important for it guides all our steps. The scripture reads this way.

John 14:15-21

¹⁵"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This 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.

¹⁸"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They 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."

Acts 17:22-31

Intro

This morning's second passage has the apostle Paul traveling throughout an area called Macedonia which has its coastline along the northern portion of the Aegean Sea. It is also just north of Greece or the northern border of Greece depending on the particular time that you are looking at that part of the world. Paul has bounced from the cities of Philippi, to Thessalonica, to Beroea. At each of these stops Paul is able to encounter levels of success in that many people come to place their faith in the risen Christ.

However, in each case, Paul leaves under difficult circumstances. In Philippi he is arrested and beaten; in Thessalonica several converts are convicted of insurrection and Paul is secretly moved out of town; in Beroea Paul is once again ushered from a city because of the turmoil that seems to follow him everywhere he goes. After leaving Beroea he heads down the Aegean coast to Athens where we are told that he waits for Silas and Timothy, two fellow servants of Christ, to join him.

It is during his time here that Paul takes note of how the intellectualism has translated itself into a plurality of religious expression. Very simply, this drives Paul nuts and he begins to speak out while in front of an area identified as the Areopagus. It is during Paul's sermon that he challenges the Athenians intellect to conceptualize the possibility that the God who they clearly are seeking is, in fact, the God of the Christians. This God, whom the Athenians have identified as unknown, has in fact made Himself quite known and is certainly not bound by the temples that human hands have constructed or the words that poets has formed.

What I would invite you to consider is this: how often have we tried to confine God to the parameters that we are comfortable with, rather than allowing God to show us how we should live or who we should be? The scripture reads this way.

Acts 17:22-31

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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. ²⁴The 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, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From 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, ²⁷so 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. ²⁸For '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.'

²⁹Since 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. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because 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."

"Unconfined"

Paul is known for his travels and, as mentioned earlier, he had been traveling quite a bit before he eventually landed in Athens. The interesting thing is, Paul clearly does not like the idea of sitting idly by and waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him there. It sounds like he has walked around the city quite a bit and has found temples to every god that could be imagined (the joy of Greek mythology). He can't handle all of this idolatry and begins to proclaim the truth that has found him in the person of Jesus Christ. This proclamation brings him before philosophers who, while they don't know what he is talking about, are willing to listen and ask him the question, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means."

This opens the door for Paul to complement the Athenians on their religiousness by talking about all of the places and objects of worship that they have. This includes an alter (in a temple) that

has the inscription, "To an unknown god". Paul uses this development to say that that which they do not know, he does. Paul states that the unknown God is, in fact, the God of all creation the God who would sacrifice his own son on a cross to redeem humanity and then raise His son from the dead so that the chains of death might be broken forever. This God whom Paul is making known to the Athenians can't be contained within the temples that they have made, or the ideological constructs that they have developed and maintained. The God whom Paul is making known is so beyond these earthly devices and is calling all people to follow wherever he might lead, including discovering one's faith in Jesus Christ. This once unknown God is someone who is so far beyond all that the Athenians could have imagined, and certainly beyond all that they had constructed.

Now it's real easy from our perspective low, these many years later, to say to ourselves, if not out loud, "boy, those folks just didn't get it."

But let's be honest, how often have our contemporaries (or groups or individuals from the not too distant past) done the exact same thing?

We cringe at the Nazi's but a very important part of their movement was something called the German Christians which pushed for a de-emphasis on the Old Testament and even removing parts of scripture that were 'too Jewish'. The few individuals who stood against this state theology (like Dietrich Bonhoeffer) were chased into hiding, rounded up and ultimately killed. It's so easy to put God into a box.

But you say, "that's Europe back in the 30's and 40's."

Alright, how about a little closer to home.

How many churches and ministerial leaders are able to point at another and say for this, that, and the other reason that they are not loved by God? 'They are a sinner.' 'They don't worship the correct way.' 'They care for people whom they should shun.' All of these generalized statements are (supposedly) based upon scripture and yet all of them are statements that were levied against the one ultimately known as messiah. Think about it: the same critiques that were thrown at Jesus are used by people who purport to believe in Jesus as Lord and savior against others.

Even the bombing in England this past week is an example of yet another person buying into an ideology that uses the Islamic faith to attack and kill all those who do not fit into the religious box that they have helped to create (or at the very least, reinforce).

Now I'm not saying that I, the Reformed church, or Three Bridges are without blemish in regards knowing God perfectly.

We certainly are not. The fact that there is as much discord in the denomination right now points to the fact that there are many who are willing place God into the box that they are comfortable with.

But what these examples are put out there to show that people, time, and time, and time again have tried to pen up God in a belief structure that is totally theirs. In the case of the scripture, the Athenians tried to keep God contained within the temples that they constructed. In the case of the Nazi's, the modern church, and Muslim Extremists, they have tried to use the Word of God (or at the very least what they see as the Word of God) to prop up their personal ideologies.

In each case, through their actions, they have high-jacked the message of God and have created their own malformed and, in way too many cases, abusive religions that are ultimately devoid of God. They have tried to make God fit who they are instead of allowing God to form who they should be.

While these examples are blatantly obvious abuses of how people try and entrap God, there are so many other ways where we either take the message that has been offered to love God and neighbor and serve as we have been called and bend it to our own belief system. Either this or we ignore the truths that have been offered entirely and act as if they aren't there.

How many of us have said that we "love our neighbors as ourselves", as we heard in our opening passage, and then promptly do nothing or as little as possible when there are ways to help others whether that be through Family Promise, the food pantry, a Mission in Motion program, or one of the many opportunities that this church participates in?

How many of us have said that we care for the creation that God has created and then proceed to use the resources that we are blessed with as if there is no tomorrow? Now I get that we know neither the day nor the time but that doesn't mean that we get to abuse the resources that we are blessed with. Use them? Yes! Abuse them? Absolutely not!

How many of us have acted as if "loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength" can be done by living out your faith on one day a week only (meaning we show up at worship and do all the right things while we're there, but then act as if Sunday is the only day that we have to be concerned with how we live out God's commandments)? For example, do your co-workers know that you believe in God? If you start to answer that query with a 'not really', what does that say about the implementation of this belief that we say that we have?

Being a disciple of the risen Christ does not mean that we get to pick and choose when we live up to the standards that have been set before us. Being a follower the creator of the whole universe means that we should not be the ones who dictate the terms of the relationship; we should be willing to follow wherever God leads us.

All of us, whether we like to admit or not, have ways that we have tried to mold God to the sort of life that we want to live.

All of us do it.

What I implore us to do is give an honest assessment of whether or not you are doing what God would have you do and who God would have you become... or if instead you are molding God to your wants.

God cannot be contained by the walls of this or any other house of worship and can is certainly not confined by any ideology. In recognizing this fact we will be able to get the perspective of God's connection to us a little closer to what it actually is. In doing so we will be able to receive the guidance and support of the Holy Spirit that is needed in order to truly become the people God would have us be.

After Sermon Prayer

O most holy and sustaining God, we know that there are too many times when we try and pen you up in way of life or thought that fits our needs. God, we know this to be true and yet we continue to do it.

Lord, we pray that You might convict us of these actions (or inactions) and have Your Spirit move in our lives so that we are able to follow, really follow where You are leading, instead of going where we feel comfortable. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.