

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Year A

RCL



Acts 17:22-31

Psalms 66:7-18

John 14:15-21

The Collect

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Acts 17:22-31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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 per-

haps 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'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we too are his offspring.'

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

Psalm 66:7-18 Page 674, BCP

Jubilate Deo

- 7 Bless our God, you peoples;
 make the voice of his praise to be heard;
- 8 Who holds our souls in life,
 and will not allow our feet to slip.
- 9 For you, O God, have proved us;
 you have tried us just as silver is tried.
- 10 You brought us into the snare;
 you laid heavy burdens upon our backs.
- 11 You let enemies ride over our heads;
 we went through fire and water;
 but you brought us out into a place of refreshment.
- 12 I will enter your house with burnt-offerings
 and will pay you my vows,
 which I promised with my lips
 and spoke with my mouth when I was in trouble.
- 13 I will offer you sacrifices of fat beasts
 with the smoke of rams;
 I will give you oxen and goats.
- 14 Come and listen, all you who fear God,
 and I will tell you what he has done for me.
- 15 I called out to him with my mouth,
 and his praise was on my tongue.
- 16 If I had found evil in my heart,
 the Lord would not have heard me;
- 17 But in truth God has heard me;
 he has attended to the voice of my prayer.
- 18 Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer,
 nor withheld his love from me.

1 Peter 3:13-22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. 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. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

John 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 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. 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.”

SERMON

During the Sundays of Easter, we've been looking at the ways the young church organized itself after the Pentecost event that we'll study in two weeks. Paul's missionary journeys happened many years after Pentecost but they show how the Holy Spirit can grab hold of someone and lead him to the most unlikely of places. Paul found himself in the most unlikely place imaginable — on the Areopagus, speaking to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers about his faith and the church of Jesus Christ.

The Areopagus was a hill in Athens where people debated philosophical questions. It was the very center of all that was intellectual about Athens, so Paul was being invited to talk to the smart guys of a very smart city.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city

was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this bab-bler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘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.’

The word translated as “babbler” actually means “seed-picker” – someone who is trying to put together a philosophy from bits and pieces. Athens was a place which prided itself on its learning but also on its breadth of tolerance, even enthusiasm, for new ideas but Paul’s message was a stretch for them. Notice that

although they addressed Paul courteously to his face, among themselves it's clear they thought him a rube. So, how did Paul do with the smart guys of Athens?

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Three different sorts of reactions. Some scoffed at the resurrection of the dead. Well, that's understandable. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof and Paul had none, save his testimony, and he wasn't an eye witness. Some said, "We'll think about this and hear more from you." That's good. They are open to this new teaching. But some, Dionysius and Damaris, became believers. What are we to make of that? Why would anyone embrace the frankly preposterous story Paul is

presenting to them without some sort of proof? It's a puzzle!

Let's leave Paul and his puzzle there for a while, and turn back 25 or 30 years, to Jesus' Farewell Discourse where we may find the answer.

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

Jesus seems to be saying that the ability to accept the Gospel, to see the truth, is a gift of God not granted to everyone. Those to whom it is granted have been empowered to act for God for the benefit of all His children. They are chosen to do the work of God.

This is a Calvinist church, and one of the tenants of Calvinist thought is this idea of "the chosen". I'll be up

front with you and say that this concept is prone to much mischief in the wrong heads. The group who goes about in the name of Christ adding to the misery of families who are laying a loved one to rest who has given his life for his country is a good example of the sort of mischief I am speaking of. Indeed, anyone who invokes the name of Christ as justification for behaving hatefully toward others has sinned grievously against this gift of God.

Nonetheless, Jesus Himself speaks of a Spirit of truth which the world cannot receive, which the world, in fact cannot see or know, but which can be seen and known by a group who has been given the gift of perceiving it. People like Dionysius and Damaris who know, Jesus says, “...because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” It is not the case that Dionysius and Damaris were just gullible. It is the case that they had

been given the ability by God to perceive the truth because it abides within them.

We're back to this abiding concept again. We're back to speaking about Christianity as a relational idea rather than a way to heaven for the good guys. We're back to speaking about God abiding in you and doing His work through you, just as we discussed last Sunday.

We're so accustomed to think in terms of "What can I do to get into heaven?", that it never seems to occur to us that this whole thing we call life isn't about us, individually. It is about God's work. My call to this church had nothing to do with brownie-points for me and everything to do with filling a pulpit that stood empty but which needed to be filled. The minute I get it into my head that your call to me reflects positively on me is the minute I become completely unqualified to stand here. It can NEVER be about me and it can NEVER be about

you! It is ALWAYS about a relationship with God by which we do His work in the world. To do so is to lay aside selfish ambition for selfless service. When an individual gets it into his or her head that he or she is The Chosen, the Calvinist train goes right off the Reformed tracks and calamity will follow as the night the day.

This is the place where it gets a little Jewish. In Talmud there is a mishnah, a commentary from the Ethics of the Fathers, which maintains that the world is sustained by the righteous, the chosen, if you like. Recall the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. God is bound to destroy these two cities, but Abraham argues:

‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the

wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’

You’ll remember that Abraham continued in that manner, finally arguing God down to a promise that if there were as few as ten righteous, he would stay his hand. Just as the Lord promised to forbear his anger against Sodom for the sake of ten righteous, the Talmud maintains that the whole world is sustained by the righteous, whatever their number. So there is, among the Jews, the story of the Pillars of the Universe, thirty-six righteous men whose existence supports the very universe. No one knows who they are, not even themselves, but when one dies, another is immediately born. I’ve included Mikael Horowitz's marvelous poem about them titled “Thirty Six Sentences on the Lamed Vovniks” as a little booklet. I hope you will take it home and read it prayerfully. Don’t just gulp it down! It’s a rich meal. Savor it.

Ask your Father for help in slowing down and reading it!

The part I hope you will digest and make a part of you is the lessons in humility Mikhael's poem presents. The Pillars of the Universe do not know who they are and thus cannot be puffed up nor prideful. We may not know who the chosen are but we can easily tell who they are not. They are not the prideful, the loudly righteous, the ones who speak hate and hurt in the name of Christ. They will not be found among the politicians or the captains of industry. Being chosen by God is not something that profits you. Those chosen are God's servants, the way God works within His Creation. There is nothing about it which should give rise to pride so they are never found among the prideful. As Presbyterian pastor Rev. Tim Keller has said, "We are a chosen people, but we are not a choice people."

As you travel God's creation, doing the work of the church, you will encounter all sorts of people. Some will scoff at your faith. It is these you must love especially, for they are blind and do not know it. Some will say, "We will hear you further". These you must love and teach, for a light glimmers within them. Feed them! And some, church, some will be among the chosen, the Pillars of the Universe. From them learn humility, and the joy of being servants of the most high God.

Oh! And since you do not know if you are speaking to one of the chosen or not, it would be very, very good indeed to treat all whom you meet as if they were one of God's chosen. You never know...

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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