

Acts 17:22-31 Pastor Bill Uetricht 6 Easter 5/17/20

These are such interesting days, on so many fronts. They are days of loss and they are also days of discovery. They are days of despair and days of hope. They are days of anger and days of gratitude. What has been most interesting to me and probably encouraging to me is that for many these are days of searching, “groping,” the book of Acts calls it.

Maybe because some of the noise of life has been dampened, unless you are a parent of younger children, of course, and then it has been amplified, or maybe because all of the stuff that we use to cover up our lives is no longer as available to us as it has been, or maybe because the Internet, while being a great place for hiding, is also a remarkable place for unveiling so much --whatever the reason, these days seem to be days of great searching. The growth in addictions that is occurring right now—ones related to alcohol, food, pornography—all demonstrate that the human journey is a journey of searching. We all are looking for something. Our addictions tell us that.

I experience today more people searching than probably at any other point in my life. The search has caused some people, believe it or not, to be a little gentler. My wife and I note that we have been arguing less since we have been in quarantine. Who would have think? Spending all this time together, we might, you would think, be prepared to pull each other’s hair out. There’s a searching going on within us.

I note that there seems to be today a resurgence among some of our younger adults in matters of faith and the practice of religion. They are searching. And that searching can be seen in their seeking connection and their desiring to find something to orient their lives around, but also in the hard questions that some of them and many of you are asking: Is God really real? If God is loving, then why is there so

much suffering? What and who can we depend upon? Is life just “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

These are hard questions, but they should not be spurned; they are the questions of the search. They are questions of people engaged in real life. They are the questions of the struggle of faith.

Paul in Acts today is in the Areopagus, Mars Hill, a public place, a place where at one-point legal decisions were made. In this place, the signs of human searching are omnipresent. And so, Paul says, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” I note all the searching you are doing. It would be interesting to know if Paul said these words with a degree of cynicism, so that his message sounded something like this: “I see how *really* religious you all are, so religious that you cover *all* your bases by having altar to an *unknown* god, just in case you might have missed one.”

In past days, I would have probably pounced on that cynicism because the human search for the big things of life was happening all the time at the casinos, the malls, the sports stadiums, in our homes. Maybe we can become rich. Maybe our kid who plays soccer will become a professional or at least get a big scholarship. Maybe purchasing more stuff will make us happy. Maybe the perfect kids and the perfect family will quench our deep thirsts.

Maybe. But the pandemic is beginning to reveal all of those holy grails as trips to nowhere. The casinos and the malls are closed. The NBA and Major League Baseball aren't putting their players on courts or fields. Perfect kids and perfect families are being revealed for the lie that they are. Living day in and day out with the kids and family is making that clear. Perhaps, then, the search is going to have to go someplace else.

You know, it strikes me that all of these searches are for something that is very far away. Hitting it big. Professional status.

Perfection. None of these are close for most of us. And note, even if we achieved any of them, quickly we'd want something more.

Paul says that the true search is for something that is near. He says that from Adam God has created all the nations and put them into some kind of boundary—limited their time and where they can roam. And he's done that so that they can search for something larger than their time and their space. He's done that so that we would search for God, and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not *far* from each one of us. As the Greek poets say, "In him we live and move and have our being," and "we are his offspring."

What we are looking for, folks, is a lot closer to us than we ever imagined. It's as near as our breath. It's as near as the folks we get to share life with. It's as near as the earth we are privileged to step on. In God we live and move and have our being. What we are searching for is not something we can get to by means of some earthly or heavenly ladder. In many ways, what we are searching for is that which all along has been searching for us, drawing near to us, loving us.

Johnny Lee has this marvelous old country music song in which he says, "I've been looking for love in all the wrong places, lookin' for love in too many faces." That's what the human search is often like. The wrong places. Too many faces. The good news is what you have been looking for in too many far off places and in too many faces is your gift now, is already here, is closer to you than you are to yourself.

You have what you need. You are living in light of a love that will not let you go. This is the love that raised Jesus from the dead and made him the judge of the earth, as Paul says. What speaks the first AND the last word to you is love. What you are searching for is love, and it is your gift now and will be forever. Maybe with so much stripped away from our lives right now, that simple message can begin

to sink in. Sometimes it takes all the layers being peeled away before we start to grasp (or be grasped by) what truly matters.

And if it is love that matters, it is no surprise, then, that Jesus in today's gospel reading invites his disciples and invites us to love him. Speaking to disciples who are afraid that they will not be able to complete their mission if he is gone from their sight, he says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." You will keep my mission going by loving as he first loved, and serving as he first served.

Are you searching for what you ought to do with your life? The most important answer to that question doesn't have to do with what job or vocation you choose. There are lots of good possibilities there. The most important answer to what you ought to do with your life is this: love! The love that is after you, the love that is searching for you wants to be so much at home in you that it spills over to all and everything that you encounter. After all, as the Gospel of John says, God so greatly loved the *world*, that is, everything, everybody, that he gave his Son, that is to say, he loved. God's sacrificial love spills over to everybody and everything. It is love that that you are searching for and love that is your calling.