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6th Sunday of Easter
Year A
University Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa, AL
27 April 2008

O God, full of compassion, we commit and commend ourselves to you. Be the goal of our pilgrimage, and our rest by the way. Let our souls take refuge from the crowding turmoil of worldly thought beneath the shadow of your wings. Let our hearts, these seas of restless waves, find our peace in you, O God.

Amen.

THE REST

ACTS 17:22-31

In Acts, a story is being written; prayers are being prayed. Paul stands at the Areopagus---“the hill of Aries”---and answers questions about this God he worships and serves. To us, Aries is a ram, a sign of the zodiac or a Dodge that stopped being made in 1989. To the Athenians gathered on the courthouse steps, Aries is the place where the judicial council meets. The setting seems appropriate, because Paul probably feels as if he is on trial for being part of a movement that is foreign to the Greeks. He is asked about his faith, and the language of the questions is anything but neutral: “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know.” If I am Paul, I doubt whether anybody is willing to listen. Do they truly want to engage in open dialogue? Or are they gathering evidence to use against me regardless of what I say (you know, at this stage in the church’s history, crucifixion is catching on)? If Paul is reluctant to face the inquisition---if he is gripped by doubt or fear---he pushes the anxiety to the side (or Luke simply edits them out of the story). When the Athenians hold up a mirror and ask, “What do you see?” Paul inverts the mirror and the question so that they may behold the chaos and dysfunction that they find when they look in the mirror.

The language of the story is simple and beautiful. Paul begins, “From one ancestor God made all nations (even Greeks) to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the

boundaries of the places where they would live (even Athens, Greece that is, not Georgia), so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for and find God---though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For God is the one in whom ‘we live and move and have our being.’” And there are those who attribute this phrase to Augustine...or to Acts. In truth, this phrase belongs to Epimenides, a poet from the sixth century BCE, whose way of understanding God helps the early church to come to terms with Christ’s physical absence, to live and move and have its being beyond grief to a place where men and women, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free eat bread and drink wine together.

By now, you know that I am interested in spiritual autobiography, in the stories of those whose wisdom gained by experience compels them to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. If you know anything about the series on this subject that I have led, you know that I begin with Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo (an office that is at least as impressive as that of Executive Presbyter). Almost every story in *The Confessions* is punctuated by prayer. So are our stories, especially as God gathers us to worship. When we confess our sins and the sins of the world---when we ask God to center us in the faith proclaimed in Scripture---we find ourselves questioning all of the traditions that we have inherited. We find ourselves celebrating forgiveness and practicing faith, faith that leads us into the world, faith that compels us to welcome all God’s children into our midst.

Of all of Augustine’s prayers, this is the one that has been most formative for me: “Everlasting God in whom we live and move and have our being: You have made us for yourself, so that our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” The PC(USA)’s *Book of Common Worship* starts one of its prayers with this one and then improvises on this theme: “Everlasting God in whom we live and move and have our being: You have made us for yourself, so that our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Give us purity of heart and strength of purpose, that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing your will, no weakness keep us from doing it; that in your light we may see light clearly, and in your service find

perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”

Standing before the Areopagus, Paul may have prayed a prayer like this. He definitely finds himself in an uncomfortable situation. Without purity of heart or strength of purpose, he may be caught up in the questioning. Any inconsistencies in his story would be exposed. The Gospel of the Lord would not be served. The God to whom he prays is the God to whom we pray: the one in whom we live and move and have our being. The relationship between Creator and creation is the same. Why are human beings created? To pursue guilty and not so guilty pleasures? No (though, granted, that has its appeal). On this subject, Paul is clear: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven *and* earth (uh, oh...there no justification for separating our religion from our politics). The Lord does not live in shrines (churches, capitol buildings or---dare I say it---football stadiums) made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands (as if the kingdom being built belongs to us, not to God), as though God needed anything,” Paul quips, “since God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”

Our belonging to God is not so much for us as it is for God. On the one hand, there is this God-shaped hole---a fundamental yearning for grace, mercy and peace---inside each and every one of us. On the other hand, there is human-shaped hole---a dysfunctional and funny-looking shape---inside of God. Why? Because we were woven together in our mother’s wombs for God’s glory, and when we feel restless, it may be that we have not opened ourselves to other people and to God as Christ has commanded. Or it may be that we are unwilling to curl up inside of God, which is precisely where we belong. It is precisely where God creates us to be. It is how God recreates us in Christ’s image.

Striving to be anything other than what God creates us to be disrupts the rhythm of our lives. This is what causes us to be restless. When we thrash around in the middle of the night haunted by the past or fearing the future, this is why. We are restless, and beneath this restlessness, there is yearning. No, restlessness and yearning are not the same, and yet in both cases, the best is yet to come. For me

(and Augustine), restlessness is symptomatic of yearning, and yearning is the low hum of God's grace that resides in the background of our lives until we recognize the tune and begin to sing-along.

Back when I was Leo Sandon's graduate student at Florida State University, I was deeply engaged in the study of religion and literature (I still am, just not for grades). During my final term on campus, the university was looking to add a nationally acclaimed writer to its English Department, and I went to hear each of the candidates. One that I remember is Robert Olen Butler, in part because he was the person who was ultimately offered the position and in part because of what he said. Butler earned a Pulitzer Prize for *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992). When asked about writing, Butler begins by saying that, "Human beings are the yearning creatures of this planet...That's the crucial thing about us, and that's what fiction is about. Every art form has certain characteristics. You cannot have the art form without those. Movement and dance, sound and music, color and form in the visual arts...fiction is about human beings and human emotions. Fiction is not about ideas...Art does not come from the mind; it does not come from ideas. It comes from the place where you dream. Because they (students) are writing from their heads, they are abstracting and generalizing, and interpreting and analyzing people's feelings, characters' feelings. They aren't expressing feelings. They lose track of yearning."

Notice that the pivotal phrase in Butler's statement on art begins with "where" and not "what:" It comes from the place where you dream. When we become restless---when we worship idols---I suspect that it is often because we are bogged down with what we are dreaming as opposed to being concerned with where we dream. It is impossible to dream unless we are asleep, and it is impossible to sleep unless we are at rest and at peace.

If you have visited the pastor's study since February, you probably have noticed that I have an affinity for Pablo Picasso's work; and there is a story behind every print that I have acquired. The story behind "The Rest" is a prayer, Augustine's prayer. It was purchased during a time in which I was

reflecting deeply on Sabbath observance, on being still and knowing that God is God. It is unclear if the woman in the painting is asleep. If there is truth in advertising, maybe she is simply at rest. Her hands are folded together, but her fingers are indistinguishable from one another. To me, the lack of clarity is comforting. It calms me in my restlessness.

When I rest as this woman rests, I know that it is possible to stand on courthouse steps and speak truth. To proclaim boldly that, "From one ancestor God made all nations," even Iraq. "God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places they would live (Tuscaloosa) so that they would search---and grope for---and find God." Wherever you are and whatever you dream, you a child of God's covenant with Israel. Whenever you are criticized for being who you are, for being who God created you to be, remember that God is the one in whom you live and move and have your being. Since you and I are God's children, we "ought not think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals." God is even better than that. When Paul said similar things to the Athenians, some scoffed, but others said, "We will hear you again about this." On this Sunday in which it appears that I will be installed as your pastor, I assure you that you will hear me again on this. Believe it. Be at peace. Be at rest. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.