

“All Loves Excelling”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 29, 2011

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Holy Scriptures: Acts 17: (16-21) 22-31

Paul in Athens

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler 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.) ¹⁹ 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? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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,²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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,²⁷ so 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.²⁸ 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.’

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

“In him we live and move and have our being.”

When church service let out

Jordan decided to walk to the festival,

choosing to leave the car to sit in the church parking lot for the time being.

Jordan knew that this meant having to walk back afterward,

but it really wasn't very far and the weather was lovely.

A few extra blocks on a sunny Sunday afternoon in May, Jordan reasoned,

would be good for increasing heart beats and lowering carbon imprints.

The last fill-up showed how quickly the car could go from zero to \$75.

Jordan said aloud to no one in particular, "Alright, I'll go green."

As Jordan began the journey down the street toward the festival,

the final hymn – such a catchy tune and words -- danced in Jordan's head.

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down; Fix in us thy humble dwelling; All thy faithful mercies crown!

Jordan noticed that the church organist had let loose on this Charles Wesley classic.

Those in the congregation had sung with a bit more energy than usual.

Not exactly a blood hymn,

but one well known and loved by the faithful.

Some Sundays Jordan left church thinking

that music touched the heart and moved the soul

more so than either the preaching or praying,

and hoped that that was okay with the Lord.

Music spoke to Jordan.

The tune flowed as Jordan approached the church park en route to downtown.

Children in the church park were playing and swinging, climbing and running.

Parents stood around in clusters, sipping from coffee cups,
talking quietly, peering at their cell phones.

Jordan wished that some of the families had been in church
and heard the same music.

Classic church music would be something they could talk about together,
something they would had in common,
something to share,
something to inspire and move kindred souls.

Worship for Jordan was comfortable.

The 75 minutes of worship on Sunday mornings was not only bearable,
it had evolved to combine ritual and inspiration, divine presence and
Kairos time

that had become so familiar and second nature

that Jordan was now able to sink into the depth and
breadth

of the service's spirituality and
disciplines.

Jordan appreciated the flow, the movement of the worship experience,
a carefully constructed series of liturgy and Word and spiritual
music
that gently moved congregants from the familiar to the new and
back again,
and led them to a place of renewal, reconciliation,
and refreshment.

The realization dawned on Jordan that, more often than not,
Jordan felt better after worship than when entering.

Now it was after,
and Jordan felt good. Really good.

Love divine, all loves excelling, indeed!

While watching a parent leave the park, pushing a stroller,
and start moving toward downtown,
Jordan noticed that they were on a collision course.

Their paths would intersect in a matter of minutes.

Jordan recalled a line from the third verse of the hymn that had stood out:

*Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit, Into every troubled
breast! Let us all in Thee inherit; Let us find that second rest.*

Jordan understood this stanza to affirm that God breathes life into all of us;

God lives in everyone and everything,

and God's Spirit is present in every troubled heart and soul.

We are all God's offspring,

inheritors of the gift of life and life everlasting.

This love divine,

this love divine, all loves excelling,

this life and breath and being

is extended to one and all,

regardless of church membership or creed or degree of faithfulness
or fear.

In church the pastor had preached on Acts 17,

in which Paul quoted a poet who lived some 600 years before him,

the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, who said,

"In him we live and move and have our being."

We live in Christ, and Christ lives in us.

Like living inside an oxygen tent,

every fabric of our being is sustained by the love of God.

In an oxygen tent we live in the oxygen, and the oxygen lives and moves in
us;

we live in Christ, and Christ lives and moves us,

and in Christ we have our being.

There is one thing that really, truly matters.

God loves you.

The love of God undergirds all of creation,

and this love lives and moves, defines and embraces and gives meaning to us all.

A new mantra went through the recesses of Jordan's mind.

"In God we live and move and have our being.

In God we live and move and have our being."

Jordan thought, *"I wonder how many people know this?*

I wonder if this family leaving the church park knows that?"

A few years back Jordan had a next door neighbor

who was always packing golf clubs into his car trunk

the same time Jordan was leaving home for church.

"Want to go with me to play nine holes?" the neighbor would say,

and on cue, as if scripted by habit, Jordan would respond,

"No, thank you. I am going to have church."

They would smile and wave;

then drive off in different directions.

One summer afternoon when they were weeding their yards,

Jordan's neighbor said, *"Let me ask you a question.*

Every Sunday morning I invite you to play golf with me,

yet not once have you invited me to go and 'have church'. Why is that?"

Jordan was dumbfounded, flabbergasted,

and looked down at the pile of weeds cut and tossed aside on the pathway.

Inviting this golf fanatic to have a spiritual encounter had never crossed Jordan's mind.

Jordan assumed the neighbor only wanted to play, not pray.

Lesson learned.

Today was different.

Jordan was not going to let a possible connection slip away like before.

Drawing nearer to the family, Jordan silently prayed, lips barely moving,

"Lord, please give me a listening ear and any words that need to be said.

Help me to trust in you to be my guide.

In the name of Christ I pray, amen."

Jordan sidled up to the parent and stroller, and said, "Hello.

I noticed that you were just in our church park. Did you have a good time?"

“Yes, we did. My son calls it the Toy Park. He loves all the donated toys.”

“Wonderful. I’m Jordan. I go to First Christian Church of Decatur,
right over there on the corner.

As you probably know, we own the park and playground.”

“I’m Dana. You mean that isn’t a city park?

We come here every Sunday morning to let our kids play in the park.

We love it! Thank you so much for the playground.”

Jordan said, “You are so welcome.

It was and is a true church and community endeavor.

Together we planned it, raised the funds, and built it,
and now we maintain it together as well.

We have noticed that since the park was completed

it has helped to shape and change this side of the city.

For example, the word on the street is that

that same coffee shop we both frequent

is the most profitable one in the chain.”

Dana said, "I did not know that. That does make sense, though."

"Actually," said Jordan, "the church owns the land
and pays for the insurance and upkeep.

Folks can make donations to help with maintenance.

We have occasional workdays, and maybe next time you could join in the fun."

Dana said, "I would love to. My son and I have a family tradition
of getting my Sunday morning coffee at the Dancing Goats coffee
shop,
then going to the park and meeting our friends there."

Jordan looked across the street at another church member headed toward a diner.

Jordan waived and then looked back at Dana,

saying, "I am happy for you.

If I may be so bold, you seem to be a faithful family.

It takes discipline and commitment

to keep up such a regular habit in
community.

Those are qualities I admire."

“I guess I never looked at it quite that way,” said Dana.

Jordan asked, “Do you have a church in this community?”

“No, we don’t go to church,” said Dana.

“Nothing personal against you and your church,

but God really disappointed me in the past,

and, honestly, I don’t care to get hurt again.

You see, when my best friend got sick,

I turned to God and asked for help for my friend. Is that too much to expect?

So I prayed and my family prayed and our other friends prayed.

I lit candles and went to church, where they prayed,

but she still died.

God ignored us; why should I pay attention to God?”

They passed by the drug store. Four teenagers came out, giggling.

Jordan and Dana waited for them to pass by.

Jordan said quietly, “I am so sorry for your loss. I’ve been there, too.

When I’ve been disappointed in God, when expectations are unmet,

I find comfort in Psalm 46: 10. “Be still, and know that I am God.”

I also found comfort in the hymn, “Be Still, My Soul”.

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side; Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain; Leave to thy God to order and provide; In every change He faithful will remain. Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly, Friend Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Dana looked at Jordan and said, “Very pretty. But I decided that I don’t believe in God.”

Jordan asked, “Would you mind describing for me the God you don’t believe in?”

Dana said, “Easy. God is cruel, judgmental, and distant. Period.”

“I see. I agree,” said Jordan.

“I don’t believe in that God, either.

The God I know and follow is kind and loving, steadfast and true.

The God I have experienced is forgiving of my errors and comforting in times of trouble.

If I may, it does sound to me like you may have encountered divine answers to prayer.

When you friend was sick, you were brought together with family and friends;

your best friend knew that many people, even strangers, cared for her;

when she passed away a God of life was there to receive her,

ease her suffering, and make her well and whole in

Heaven.

These may not have been the answers expected,

yet maybe, just maybe, you received a holy response.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

They crossed the street at the light.

As soon as they stepped on the curb, out of the blue Dana asked,

“Is your church fundamentalist?”

Jordan looked at Dana and saw the seriousness.

Jordan looked Dana in the eyes and said, “Good question. I’m glad you asked.

Our vision is to reflect the diversity of Decatur,

which in turn reflects the diversity of Creation.

Recently there was an interfaith gathering of people from across Decatur.

They talked about fundamentalism

in an attempt to get a handle on what it means today.

They came up with this working definition:

regardless of whether fundamentalists are Jewish, Muslim, or Christian,

they believe that at some point God stopped doing anything new.

In other words, fundamentalists believe that the Creator has stopped

creating.”

Jordan paused. “With all due respect,

you and I don’t need to look very far

to know that the One who created is still creating.”

Dana got distracted by someone at an ATM who was smacking and kicking the machine.

Another passerby was offering to help the frustrated cardholder.

Dana said, “Do you think God is still creating?

I thought that the church said that creation ended in the Garden of Eden.”

Jordan exclaimed, “Look at your beautiful child!

Is the Creator within the new life in your stroller?

Consider your friendships.

Are they evolving and changing? Do they remind you of the holy?

Is God blessing you daily with fresh starts and new beginnings?”

Dana was listening intently.

Jordan said, “Let’s put it another way.

My mantra is, “*In God we live and move and have our being.*”

We live in Christ, and Christ lives in us.

Ever see an oxygen tent?

The patient lives in the oxygen and the oxygen lives and moves in the patient.

In the same way we live in Christ, and Christ lives in us and moves us,
and in Christ we have our being.

Like living inside an oxygen tent,
every fabric of our being is sustained by the love of God.

There is one thing that really, truly matters, Dana: God loves you.

Our church affirms the loving activity and movement of God in your life right now.

That is a roundabout way to say, ‘Dana, no, we are not fundamentalist.’

This congregation is open and accepting.

The practice of Christian hospitality is a vital part of our identity.

The playground is one, very visible example of hospitality.

You and your family and friends would be most welcome.

Here we draw upon God’s gifts of faith and reason.

We like to say, please don’t check your brain at the door. Use it!”

By now they were nearing the entrance to the festival.

Jordan could sense that they were ready to part ways.

Dana said, “Well, we’ve got to go. Good talking to you!”

Jordan said, “I have enjoyed meeting you.

Here, let me write down my phone number on this worship bulletin,
and you can call me if you have any questions.

We would love to have you visit sometime soon.”

Dana said, “Thanks. No promises. Enjoy the festival!”

“You, too!”

Jordan drew strength that in biblical times as in today,

when the love of Christ is shared

some scoff, some believe, and some let it work in them.

As Jordan offered up a silent prayer of thanksgiving,

the mantra returned, now stronger than ever.

“In God we live and move and have our being.

In God we live and move and have our being. In God we live...”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Extra material:

“What you don't understand is that it is possible to be an atheist, it is possible not to know if God exists or why He should, and yet to believe that man does not live in a state of nature but in history, and that history as we know it now began with Christ, it was founded by Him on the Gospels.”

“Now what is history? It is the centuries of systematic explorations of the riddle of death, with a view to overcoming death. That's why people discover mathematical infinity and electromagnetic waves, that's why they write symphonies. Now, you can't advance in this direction without a certain faith. You can't make such discoveries without spiritual equipment. And the basic elements of this equipment are in the Gospels. What are they? To begin with, love of one's neighbor, which is the supreme form of vital energy. Once it fills the heart of man it has to overflow and spend itself. And then the two basic ideals of modern man—without them he is unthinkable—the idea of free personality and the idea of life as sacrifice.”

--Boris Pasternak (from Doctor Zhivago)