

The Apostle Paul is often criticized in twenty-first-century circles for promoting a gospel that's too rigid, too exclusive, and in many instances, too chauvinistic. In some cases, I don't think such criticism is out of line. If you have a ministry that lasts several decades, and the only records of that ministry are several letters to various audiences with varying topics over twenty years, you are bound to be controversial. And even if everything is read in proper context, where there's smoke, there is usually at least a little bit of fire. If you've got a more negative perception of Paul's letters, and of the man himself, I'm not gonna fault you for it. And I'm not gonna ask you to rapidly, and radically alter your opinions of Paul. I would, however, urge you to remember that in most instances, it's not Paul who should be demonized, it's people who choose to weaponize and mutate fragments of his letters for their own personal and political gains by taking very specific advice given to very specific audiences and applying that advice to very general and very contemporary concerns. Furthermore, ours is a faith in transformation—we seek to continually grow, and evolve, and mature in our application of belief, and in our relationships with God and neighbor. In Paul, here is one who in his youth applied a rigid, even violent strand of fundamentalism to his faith. And yet in his old age, Paul reminds his dearest friends of the joy, peace, and love that God makes readily available to all.

What I'm getting at, is that Paul, like each one of us, is complicated. You are gonna find a lot gray space when Paul enters your conversations and discussions. And we're living in an age where gray space creates an awful lot of polarization and partisanship. Therefore, I find this morning's text particularly timely and helpful. I believe Paul, a polarizing figure in any age, in this particular instance, models exemplary behavior in how people of faith should engage people who practice faith in alternative ways.

Remember, Paul is an evangelist, another tricky term these days. Paul has traveled all throughout Asia Minor and Greece, much of it in great peril, to share his conversion experience, and expand the Jerusalem Church to the larger world. Prayer, and testimony, and teaching are not uncomfortable for Paul—he's eager to share his story. And he feels called and empowered to be a witness of the Easter events, which he believes are still in motion. You don't send doctors on humanitarian missions to not apply their services and expertise; you don't send

entertainers on tours to not perform their craft; you don't become a missionary to be silent about how the divine has transformed you.

Paul finds himself in Athens, the very center of culture, and of philosophical thought, and of authentic, learned activity. It's certainly fair to say that Paul doesn't see a society expressing a reverence for God in the exact way he would choose to do. But it's also fair to say that Paul doesn't see Athens in the same way as he sees Rome. In Rome, he sees the worship of idols, and an Emperor Cult refusing to empathize with even the most basic of human needs. He sees Godlessness. Not so in Athens. Here, Paul sees thoughtful people, who he describes as "extremely religious in every way." Athenians are genuinely concerned with the source of their being – they recognize the presence of the divine, and they think the exploration and articulation of God are a fitting pursuit.

Paul notices their authenticity and intentionality, especially in the worship of an "unknown God." You have to admit, there's a real poignant intent in Athens – there are a dozen or so named gods in the city, but its citizens also give space for the god or gods they cannot articulate, or imagine, or express. It's as if they are saying, "We know we're human, we know we're small, we know we're finite, we know we're fallible, so we offer thoughts and prayers, because there is more than we can comprehend. And we long to know the presence that provides our source, but is yet to be revealed."

Rather than dismiss the Athenians for their differences, Paul takes time to appreciate these differences, and then finds an angle to express how his faith in a known God might offer insight and comfort to their own exploration. Paul tells them that the unknown God they revere has been revealed in the known God of Israel, that such a God is accessible to all nations, and that it's in this God that humanity finds its essence and grounding – it's in this God that we "live and move and have our being."

In this setting, Paul expresses confidence and openness in his belief in the way of Jesus, and the worship of God, while maintaining a healthy dose of respect for the new neighbors he engages. Too often, when we are guests, we feel the need to do one of two things: 1) Express our views and beliefs in ways that are judgmental and inaccessible... "You are doing this wrong, and let me tell you why, and let me

assume that you see and experience the world exactly as I do” or 2)
Abandon/ignore our convictions to maintain the peace. We refuse to
comfortable in our convictions. Paul manages to thread the needle, which
admittedly is not something he can always do. He finds a mutual point of access
to the divine, and he expresses/suggests how his experience might be helpful for
the experience of those whom he engages.

Having established a connection with this audience in the mutual longing for a
God who reveals himself or herself to humanity, and pronounces that investment
in spirit and umph, Paul turns his attention to where we might experience such a
God...not in finite things, not in gold, and silver, and capital projects, but instead
in righteous living, in covenant, bound up in God, neighbor, and land. I would
argue that Paul doesn't bulldoze his way through this morning's conversion
exercise, he dialogues his way into the opportunity for meaningful conversation.

Well, I have to be honest with you, many weeks ago, when I selected this passage,
I imagined a sermon all about that God in whom we live, and move, and have our
being. I imagined a flowery sermon, full of words that sort of float.

What I didn't imagine was leaning on Paul, captain of curmudgeons, the original
grumpy old man, to show me a gracious, humble, resilient way to engage with a
cultural mindset I do not understand. But here I am.

We find ourselves nearly sixty days into social distancing, paralyzed in many ways,
by a virus we cannot see, and we cannot understand. And in a manner of weeks,
our posture has changed substantially – we are polarized over a lingering
question: “When should we open the world again?!?”

I don't consider myself an evangelist, but like Paul, I do feel called to express my
faith and my beliefs. And like Paul in Athens, I want to express my thoughts on
common ground, not from above on some lofty tower.

Paul encouraged the Athenians to seek that very thing they longed for: a God that
grounded them, and gave them purpose.

That's where I hope we can gather this morning. Here in this community, we express a mutual connection to God, seen through the expression, life, ministry, and ongoing resurrection of Jesus. Through that story, we find our grounded-ness.

I would argue that one of the things that makes us grounded in God, is that God provides us a sense of security. I would also argue, that no matter your opinion regarding the tenacity and danger of COVID-19, a unilateral concern is safety and security. We all want to resume a lifestyle where we feel reasonably certain that we are safe and protected.

And when I think about what God's protection or grounding means, I am flooded with images of the Exodus story. I remember a Pharaoh, who like so many other leaders, confuses power with generosity. How generous he thinks he is, to build a war machine that repels neighbors; to feed and clothe and house his enslaved servants – you know he's not really required to do such a thing; how wonderful it will be for his people when a great and permanent pyramid rises into the sky to proclaim the life he lived so well...oh how his people deserve such a legacy.

And I think about manna. No, not the minimum, not the basics, not the essentials. But enough – that point where you are filled but not spoiled – that place that occupies the last point in the curve before diminishing returns. And I think about that God who provided it – so mighty he could part a sea; so clever she could appear in a burning bush; so present she burned in fire of pillar and cloud; and so humble, she asked for a tent, a tabernacle that could travel with her people. I think about a God whose generosity and security is covenantal, not conditional.

I cannot unsee the Exodus tension throughout the whole of scripture of pyramid versus manna; Caesar's legacy versus God's community.

And I am hounded by a question: as a community of faith, do we want to build Pharaoh's pyramid or sit at the table of God's manna?

Well my answer is that I think we are called to be ambassadors of enough-ness. I think that means that when we make faith-based decisions, whether that's reopening our country, or living wholly and fully in our neighborhoods, or seeking to align our lifestyles with the One we proclaim to follow, we would do well to

equate security with manna. For God is not in gold, or silver, or stone, or even in Amazon packages, but instead, God is in each of us, God's offspring. Therefore, our decisions ought to be based on how we recognize our shared and common humanity, and what we can do to honor a covenant bound up in God, neighbor, and land.

We've spent an awful lot of time bickering about the specifics of how we're gonna reopen our world. And we all have strong feelings. But the desire to influence reopening on our own terms mustn't diminish our Christian duty, indeed our human duty, to think beyond the short term. The bigger issue we must all continue to discern is what kind of world we want to make.

So on this Sunday, I ask you to think about the decisions you are making. Are they being made to help reinstall and recuperate a finite sense of security, or are they being made to work for that day when all of God's children wake up to morning dew that quenches their thirst for belonging, and a flaky bread that fills their appetite for justice and love?

Friends, may God make us a thoughtful people! May God make us a people eager for the security of manna. May God make a world, where old curmudgeons, Greek philosophers, and neighbors, of the mask-wearing and non-mask-wearing varieties, experience the grace, grounded-ness, and security of a Creator who is known, no matter what's inscribed on the altar.

May it be so! And may it be soon!

Amen.