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Acts 17: 22–31

## MEMORIES

Paul essentially says the impulse to worship is good. The desire to explain God is good. He doesn't go on to say that all our attempts will fall short, but they do. In fact as part of being in the reformed faith, we remember events like the gathering of elders and clergy at Westminster long ago where they sought to explain and write an explanation of their confession—a teaching tool they called a catechism. That would be the latest and greatest curriculum of the 1600s.

And as it turned out, the seventh question of the catechism, the larger catechism based on the Westminster confession of faith, is a question about who is God, or as they said it, what is God. They spent days upon days debating the right answer. They could not come up with an answer to this catechism question that would satisfy everyone in attendance.

And so, after a long and arduous discussion, one morning they called upon a man named John to pray so that they could begin their work of the day. He stood and he said, “Oh God, in spirit you are infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection. You are all sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful, and most gracious, long suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth. We ask for you to be with us today.” And as he sat down they all knew they had their answer. The debating could stop. The introduction to his prayer was the perfect description and they wrote it down quickly. The debate had ended. It seems this group of elders and clergy had as much difficulty describing what God means to us.

We might say, “What difference does it make that we believe in God?”

I remember a story of a little girl who was coming home from school. She was surprised to meet her father coming toward her on the sidewalk. The father had the unenviable task of telling the little girl that her dog Rover had been hit by a car that day and had died. In searching for comfort, as we often do, the father wanted to offer some platitudes to comfort the girl. So he said, “I want you to know that Rover is safe now with God. You see God must have needed a dog so much that God called Rover up to heaven to be with him.” The little girl listened to her father's explanation but they respectfully asked, “Why would God want a dead dog?”

Sometimes our attempts to explain God—our attempts to make sense of faith, or worse, to turn faith into a philosophy or a religion rather than into worship—seem just as silly and as short-sighted, don't they? A little child still leads us with their clarity of thought.

Faith is about serving God—offering something that God makes worthy. In the same way that the choir gathers on Wednesday evenings to practice—to rehearse, for Sunday—Sunday worship is practice and rehearsal for everything that we are supposed to do for the rest of the week, if only we would hear God calling us into service. If only we would confess our weakness. If only we would turn to scripture and its truth. If only we would praise God with everything that we have and determine again to work in God's venue. How different our days could be.

Paul wants us to know that the living God dwells in our hearts, not in our buildings, and certainly not in our intellectual constructs, and all too often, not even in our life styles. So driven are we by our fatalistic thoughts, desires, pursuit of pleasures which we know in the end have little meaning. Paul wants us to know that God is all sufficient. Paul wants us to know that if we withhold who we are from God, we are the ones to be pitied, not our heavenly father.

And so, when we act as if God needs us, instead of us needing God, we in essence diminish who God is. We shrink God down to something that is manageable for our life-styles. We always labor to understand Jesus' prayer in the garden. "Not my will, but thine be done." Early in last century when J. B. Phillip wrote about Acts 17, in his sermon he said, "God is not a resident policeman. God is not a parental hangover (I think he meant leftover, but the times betray us.). Phillip says "God's not a grand old man or a pale Galilean. You can't put God in a box or a landscape or even in a book or a degree or a career." No God is greater than all this and God is greater because of God's intimacy. As real as our next breath, our next thought. And this God who knows us so well and demands our loyalty and our devotion.

It's not optional. It is in fact essential that we believe that God is nearer to us than we want to admit. And when we do in fact adjust our habits, our way of life and begin to look for God, we discover that God was already there waiting for us. When we try to be obedient, God is the source of our courage, of our deep desire to simply be at peace with God, close enough to God to be set free from the guilt of our past. And yet, always dependent for our response to what God is doing in our midst.

It hasn't been that many days since about 40 people gathered in this sanctuary and participated in something called *New Beginnings* ... we are still learning how it will develop in our congregation. But I was amazed when we were asked about our spiritual gifts. I realized we don't really have that language at our fingertips. What are our gifts of the spirit? Well, with school winding down and summer cranking up, I intend to make it one of my goals that we will have that language at our fingertips by the time September rolls around. You see the spiritual gifts lifted in scripture include things like showing mercy and compassion, giving and leading, teaching and exhorting. Yes, even simple acts of ministry and prophetic speaking of truth. They are pastoral and they are also miraculous. They are discerning. They seek knowledge and wisdom and healing. And I see those gifts in abundance in you.

So what would it take for us to be free enough to respond to God creatively—to be done with our idol making, which is what Paul tells the Athenians to do? Enough with forming gold and silver into a lifeless god. At one point Calvin says, “The human mind is a perpetual forge of idols.” But we believe in Jesus Christ who has set us free from worship of self and empowered us for discipleship. We believe that God calls us into a relationship so that our lives can bear meaningful fruit that lasts, that will be here long after we have returned to God who is our life and breath, and our source.

Let us today affirm again what we believe about Jesus and about our own faith as we stand and repeat the ancient words of the Apostles’ Creed. Think about this as you prepare to express your faith: This creed was shared for nearly 700 years orally. It was memorized and not written down. The Nicene Creed had to be written down pretty soon on, but this creed was so integral to the early faith of the church that everyone knew it by heart. May we now know again the gospel of Jesus as we say this creed.