

May 29, 2011

## *Our Search: Can God Be Really Known?*

Gracious God, May these words be your words of grace. Amen

I remember when I was a little girl; one of our Sunday school activities was to draw a picture of God. All of our pictures looked about the same. Most of us drew an old white man with a huge beard and a long white robe floating among the clouds. Somehow I knew this wasn't right. There had to be more to God than this. I wanted to know more about God. I remember praying and praying, "God show me what you are like." It was a fall day, and the wind was blowing, stirring the bright leaves. Suddenly a huge gust of wind blew that sent everything flying. That wind seemed to blow right through me and my heart was touched in a profound way. Even now, 40 plus years later when someone asks me what my image of God is, I think about that fall day.

How do we see God? How does God act in our lives?

A friend in college expressed a desire to have a rocking chair for her room. She told us that she would pray for it and God would provide. We all chuckled. With all that was going on in the world, why would God take a moment to make sure she had a rocking chair? A week later, there sitting in the room was a rocking chair. Her grandmother was cleaning out the attic and found the chair and remembered that our friend wanted one. God's intervention? God cares about rocking chairs and parking places? If we are all interconnected through God's spirit, then does God act even in the midst of our smallest prayers? Why then is there so much devastation in our lives?

This week we have seen scenes of tornado damage in Joplin, Minnesota, and Oklahoma. We are astounded by the hugeness of the devastation. People's lives are torn apart by loss. Everything they have ever owned is gone. People have lost people they love- Some literally torn away from their grasp. How does someone recover from this? The insurance companies refer to tornados as "acts of God". Some preachers preach with fervor, "This is God's anger". Others grasping for anything say, "this is a part of God's plan." In Hinduism there are many Gods. Brahm is the God of creation. Shivra is the God of destruction and Vishnu is the God of preservation. Is God, the one God we celebrate, one of creation and destruction? That is a hard pill for me to swallow. For the times in my life when I experienced God most powerfully, is when people have miraculously reached beyond humanly able, to care, rebuild, listen and cry together in crisis.

That is why Jesus is so important in our lives. Jesus gives us a window into God's grace. God offers to us creative compassion in the midst of devastation. God offers us resurrections. Paul preached about this in Athens. He told the people that the "unknown God" was the one of creation, one who lives and moves in us --- who gives us Jesus and resurrection.

There is a legend about Athens, centuries before Paul even arrived. There was a mighty plague in the city and they weren't sure which of the many Gods were angry. They didn't know who to appease. Finally after a series of bizarre events, they erected an altar to the unknown God. The legend says that the plague ended shortly after that.

When Paul stopped in Athens on his way to Corinth, he decided to do some sight-seeing. The city was known for its beauty, literature, and philosophy. Paul was astounded by the hundreds of Gods that he saw – beautifully hand crafted idols and images of one of their Gods. Paul was a passionate evangelist. Here he was surrounded by idols and cynical philosophies. The philosophers fell into two categories: Those who believed that this physical world is all there is; and those who believe that God is in the midst of everything – every mud pie ever made, every vein of every leaf, and every drop of rain.

Paul had a different story to share. The crowd thought Paul was going to introduce them to two new gods: Jesus & Resurrection. Paul instead shared these truths with them.

1. We are all searching for something more – a touch with the divine.
2. We create idols to satisfy our needs.
3. The “unknown God” is the God who created and creates life. God is not a God that is manipulated, crafted by humanity. Jesus is the one who gives us a glimpse of God.

We are all searching – We are all searching for purpose, a way to belong. We want the world to make sense. We want to understand why and we want to be creative. We search for someone or something to love. Our hearts, souls, bodies ache for the God who created and creates us. In the book, Eat, Pray, & Love, the author describes a journey of searching for her center. She looked for meaning in pleasure, language, food, friendship, prayer, meditation, and ultimately in love. She quit sleep walking through life and began paying attention. All of our journeys are the same in a way. We create idols to satisfy our needs. We have to find someone or something to fill that place of fear, aching & emptiness, so we create gods in our own image.

Not only do we have the idols of:

Consumerism – “If only I had that coat, or car, or house, my life would be complete: It rarely is!

Violence & Power – If I can control my situation and others, I will know peace, prestige, popularity, celebrity.

We also make our image of God an idol – we try to box in God, manipulate God, and draw a picture of God who looks like us. Anne Lamott says, “If we believe that God hates all the same people we hate, then our God is too small. God is the one who created us, NOT we who create GOD. We can discover moments of grace and love that open the door to God. In another sense we can’t completely know God.

BUT – God who created us calls us to greater knowledge, great love, and greater intimacy. We find ourselves walking past all of our idols to the altar of the unknown God. At that altar we see glimpses of God through the person of Jesus.

- We see Jesus healing a paralysed man lowered through a roof
- We see Jesus feeding thousands from little and hope that we too can help to feed thousands.
- We see Jesus stilling turbulent waters
- We see Jesus weeping for a friend
- We see an empty tomb
- We see Jesus greeting the disciples and us with deep, deep love.

Because of Jesus, we too can become a part of the work and play and mystery of God.