

Finding God Close

Acts 17: 22-31

John 14: 15-21

Writing in his *A Spiritual Biography*, theologian and scholar William Barclay told how his twenty-one-year-old daughter and her fiance were both drowned in a boating accident.

An anonymous letter arrived that said, "I know now why God killed your daughter; it was to save her from corruption by your heresies."

Barclay wrote, "If I had the writer's address, I would have written back...as John Wesley said, 'Your god is my devil.'"

When you encounter other Christians and discover the shape of some of their beliefs, you can quickly become appalled, as Barclay was.

I had a back-and-forth with a known libertarian on a Facebook forum. Someone else had posted a meme – an image with some clever remarks added – which showed a typical picture of Jesus but placed him in front of the US Capitol building, and the meme text which has Jesus saying: "You want a nation based on my values ... but refuse to heal the sick and help the poor."

The libertarian commenter noted: "False gospel. Christians should help the poor on an individual level not hide behind the government. Forcing people to give isn't giving." He would later go so far as to claim that government taxation is stealing, and of course, Jesus would never endorse stealing. After more back-and-forth where I was clever and wise and he was not – I'm telling the story here, so I get to spin it – he made a remark that ended the discussion for me: "Hopefully you don't teach your church members this false doctrine." My reply was that he had NOTHING – in caps – Facebook for shouting – to teach me. What I meant was more along the lines of what Barclay had written: "Your god is my devil."

We're assured repeatedly in scripture that God is close by, and numerous instances where God makes the divine presence felt rather suddenly and unexpectedly, as if God was close by. Of course, the presence of Jesus brought the presence of God and sacred teaching close by. As noted in other post-Easter sermons, Jesus' proximity in post-resurrection appearances was not as his earthly self, but in a form that was not readily apparent to Mary at the tomb, for example, or to the travelers on the road to Emmaus. In those instances (and others), Jesus needed to disclose himself in some way in order to be recognized.

In my discussion with the libertarian whose views contrasted with everything I understood, the nagging thought is that God's presence may be close by, but recognition of that presence can be lacking. Our image of God is often too caught up in our designs. When God simply becomes a reflection of ourselves, we're lost.

In this post-Easter period, we continue to share with the disciples the struggle to understand God as independent from ourselves, our assumptions, and our traditional and customary equations, yet also close by, close enough to be right next to us and still remain unrecognized.

In the reading from Acts, the apostle Paul is in the Greek capital city of Athens. After spending time there and preaching regularly in the synagogue and in the marketplace, he runs into a group of philosophers. They invite him to a meeting, presumably of other philosophers, being held by the Areopagus, a rock outcrop near the (better known to us) Acropolis also known as Mars Hill, and known as the area where court was held. Not being a lawyer, and the court not being a philosophical debating society, Paul is really at a meeting of learned Greek philosophers. In debating format, we hear Paul making his case about the true nature of God.

Paul begins by noting the religiosity of the Greeks, having seen many different altars, shrines, and sacred places devoted to one god or another. He is particularly taken with the altar that is dedicated in an inscription to *AN UNKNOWN GOD*. From that starting point, Paul declares, *Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples built by hands.* In his explanation, Paul connects the work of God to the establishment of all humanity and God's providence for the human creation, stating that *God did this so that [people] would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*

Let's remember that the Greek gods had dramatic myths surrounding their origins and activities, known for breaking the rules and interfering with human relationships – getting close. But Stoics and Epicureans were typical among the learned who understood that those were indeed myths. Their opinion held that the order of life, time, and space should be explored and understood philosophically. Philosophy can be highly abstract and inadequate for explaining personal experience. We find that's often the case in Christian thinking. The questions aren't necessarily irrelevant; but they may be difficult and not have any adequate answer. Hence an unknown god is not odd here.

However, Paul has no qualms about making bold statements, insisting that the worship of idols, or better, holding to teachings that fail to embrace the true nature of God, require repentance or change. By the end, many disapprove of Paul's counsel while a few others remain interested in exploring his teaching further. You have to figure that those who continued to pursue Paul's teaching had to have been struck by his words: *God did this so that [people] would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*

The Greek gods were seen as remote, and for the learned, the notion of God being close, with the devoted being able to reach out and find God not far from us would seem quite unusual. Having opened this doorway to the idea of God being close and discoverable, we could easily imagine Paul introducing the subject of Jesus, risen Savior, Son of God. It's no surprise that a few became new disciples, encouraged by the God who goes with them.

This close presence of God gets expressed in another way by Jesus in his final discourse with his disciples in John 14. (The final discourse follows the foot washing scene in the previous chapter and will continue for two *more* chapters.)

Jesus has been trying to explain that the time is fast approaching when he will be departing from them. Jesus wants them to understand where he is going, what he is doing, and what it all means.

In this segment, we hear Jesus promising the coming of the Counselor, or Holy Spirit, or in Greek, the Paraclete. It's a word we only find here in John and nowhere else in the New Testament. This Counselor refers not only to one who gives counsel, but also in the legal sense as an advocate, as a counselor in court. Remember that in the next chapter, Jesus will be reminding the disciples of the hatred that the world will heap upon them. The Paraclete, the Counselor, is to be their strength in times of trial and suffering under persecution. Jesus will return to this notion of the Paraclete once again to end that segment about persecution (John 15: 26-27).

The notion of a Counselor or a Comforter indicates the kind of priority that the relationship has. Jesus isn't sending a teacher, or worse a *substitute* teacher. Jesus isn't sending a Superman for a bodyguard. Jesus isn't sending a corporate turnaround specialist to help build profitable revenue generators into a church programming, or an accountant to help them run an every member canvass fundraising campaign, or a rich guy who wants to build a building to honor himself, or an evangelist who could make a bundle with a TV ministry. What a blessing! Thank you, Lord Jesus. And Lord, we're sorry about those Christians and churches that never got the message.

Jesus promises an advocate who knows and understands our struggles and seeks justice and goodness for us. Thank you, Jesus.

Jesus concludes this section with the 'I am in the Father, you are in me and I am in you' statement design. It's very hard to listen to and almost as hard to read as the relationships shifts several times within a single sentence. More important than sorting it all out is that the terms of the relationship are spelled out. So if you listen for the verbs, it's more bearable.

In the first sequence, the point is one being **“in”** the other, as in intimacy. The second set connects acts of obedience as a reflection of love. The third set emphasizes the circularity of love that indeed reveals Jesus himself to the one who loves likes Jesus and is devoted to Jesus. I don't take this magically or literally as a new resurrection appearance before us or them. Rather, it is that Jesus becomes flesh once again in us as we embody his love for others. Each set identifies the close relationship Jesus will have with his loving faithful.

The close intimacy of Jesus with his followers is a reflection of the close intimacy of Jesus with God. They are all united. And the disciples are united in the purpose and promise of God through Jesus.

This sacred intimacy is a source of comfort, assurance, and strength for the individual disciple. In this relationship, the faithful are able to find healing when broken and hurting, are able to discover one who knows and understands in times of confusion and doubt, and find strength in witness when weakness and insecurity can seem paralyzing.

Let's remember that Jesus becomes flesh once again in us as we embody his love for others. When this love is not embodied, there is no Jesus alive in us and with us. The faithful are given all of this so that their work for the kingdom of justice and righteousness will go forward. This special status is given so that the followers of Jesus can be active as the healers who bind up the wounds of others, who share in compassion and concern for others when their world is falling apart and they're shaken and beaten down, who will stand up for the weak and vulnerable when the world's powers seek to exploit and dominate.

In this close companionship, we are to be the body of Christ for others, showing in our decisions, in our attitudes, in our actions, in our living, what salvation in Christ looks like. The faithful are then in Christ indeed as Christ is in them and becomes visible once again to the world through them.

We find God is close, that Jesus is close, that the Counselor is close, when we manifest the love of Christ in our work of ministry. Absent that love which anchors the whole process, and there is no God, no Christ, no Counselor. Those who can profess by words a Christian faith, but have no love are, as Paul said in the beginning of 1st Corinthians 13, *a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*.

This, too, is the caution for those who fail to separate the distinct nature of God and the Kingdom from their own attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions. Then we would echo Barclay who quoted John Wesley, seeing not the God of our faith, a God of love, grace, and peace, but "Your god is my devil."

Jesus is close, and God is close, as close as the love which we offer in witness. Indeed, the resurrection is made most real once again as we come to reflect the Lord, being his body of love, compassion, justice, and peace.

And Jesus is distant, absent when our witness lacks love, compassion, justice, or peace.

May we know that Jesus is close, and make our loving witness that enlivens him through our faithful ministry.