

Acts 17: 16-31 "Groping for God" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/21/18

So I went this week to see what is typically called a "chick flick," but definitely brought some guys in the theatre to tears as well. "A Star is Born" is on its 3<sup>rd</sup> remake, this time with Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper, who also directed the film – some of you, like I do, remember the 2<sup>nd</sup> version with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson and may be suspicious that it couldn't get better than that. I dare say, it can. There is song in this version called "Shallow" that has quickly shot up the charts that begins with Bradley Cooper singing (and who knew that was possible?). His words start off, "Tell me somethin' girl, are you happy in this modern world? Or do you need more? Is there something else you're searching for? I'm fallin'. In all the good times I find myself longin' for change and in the bad times I fear myself." It is a brilliant assessment of so many of us who are searching for something, longing for change, and afraid of what we are capable of, when we are truly lost. They are new lyrics for a timeless movie and it occurred to me that this classic story still fits, no matter how many times we see it retold on the big screen.

Searchers... isn't that what we all are in one way or another? Some search for God, some search for meaning, some for joy. Some seek health and happiness, some look for family and belonging, some seek peace and solitude. There are people who long for fame, and others who want nothing more than quiet anonymity, people who want to be rich, and people who are ready to simplify their lives by getting rid of possessions. Most of us, at some time or other, have a feeling that something is missing. Even the great Abraham Lincoln once noted, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day." It seems that we are not unlike the ancient Athenians. They were looking for something; a pagan society who

had erected structures to every god represented in their pluralistic society. In fact, Athens was considered the “god capital of the world” filled with so many gods that the people must have needed something like the Yellow Pages or Google just to keep track of the many deities already represented in their city. There was even one built to “an unknown god” in order to cover all the bases. Were they still searching? Paul, the apostle within our scripture today, seemed to think so.

Searching isn't a bad thing – it signifies that you care about deeper meaning. But some quests are more shallow than others. As the complete song from the movie implies, shallow goals typically produce shallow results. Fame and possessions, for example, don't usually yield deep satisfaction. Those pursuits, the shallow ones, can turn into idols when they replace the deeper searches for meaning. Satisfaction comes more completely when we are far from the shallow, rather than engulfed by it. As we begin our annual Stewardship Campaign this year, we are invited to consider what significant rather than shallow contributions the church has made in our lives and how we, in turn, can give back with our time, talents and treasure. The theme is entitled “What Shall We Bring” and the phrase might make us think of the wise men and the gifts they bring to the manger, and that is ok. Ultimately, we are considering what gifts we bring to God and how our sharing directly reflects and affects our search for meaning. As opposed to the more common money-oriented texts used to kick off a stewardship campaign, the story of Paul with the Athenians is chosen as a reminder that some gifts put to good use for the people of God are often not seen as such. Today I ask you to consider that the act of searching or groping for God can be a gift in and of itself to God. As we have seen over the past few weeks in church, questioning God, pondering whether we might be a mystic or not, seeking

God in new and creative ways is a gift both to the church and to God. We are in a time in the life of the universal church, according to scholar Phyllis Tickle, that occurs every 500 years or so that can be compared to a really large rummage sale. Every 500 years of our history, the people of God have entered into a time of discernment, seeking what is still relevant and worthwhile, deciding what to hold onto and what to let go of, letting some of the old ways die and embracing what will foster God's new creation. That time has come upon us again and I challenge us to ponder how we are living in a time of opportunity rather than threat as the church is reinvented. The idea of the church being in this grand rummage sale personally gives me this whole new sacred perspective to our Thrift Store, as we actively support clearing out the clutter and reinventing a simpler life by God's invitation. Therefore, all of you who work there are fostering God's new creation for such a time as this.

Paul's interaction with the Athenians prompts them to do some soul searching as they weigh what is worthy and what is not. The Athenians are artistic seekers who value spirituality, intellect, dialogue and new approaches to life. Athens is filled with argument, a place of philosophical banter and debate. Paul is one who values debate and rarely keeps his mouth shut. He finds commonalities between Christianity and the Greek culture so as to engage the Athenians in thought-provoking dialogue. As a person of faith, he values the idea of not checking your brain at the door. He resonates with the idea that when two people agree on everything, one of them is doing all the thinking. I don't know if you have ever thought about it this way before, but one of the gifts of this congregation is that we are sort of like Paul in that regard. We agree to disagree and that doesn't prevent us from being family, from laughing together in the good times and crying together in the bad. Like Paul, we seek to bring to God

gifts like respect for others, a willingness to show your true colors, and an openness to listening to a differing viewpoint. These are acts of being a good steward with God's gifts.

Paul models this as he brings to God his propensity to "argue" while maintaining his love for those with whom he debates. The "unknown god" for which the Athenians are searching, Paul reveals to be the God of heaven and earth who does not live in shrines made by humans. This God made all people, he says, in such a way that they would grope to find God and no other. Unlike Paul's other sermons in Acts, he doesn't quote Hebrew scriptures or mention any aspect of Jewish history. It is remarkable that he is willing to affirm aspects of Athenian religion that at first distressed him. This goes back to the ability to accept the gifts of somebody we don't necessarily agree with. Then using a line from one of their own Greek poets, Paul tells them that this is the God "in whom we live and move and have our being." One can imagine the Greek philosophers around him, some laughing with scorn, some discussing with puzzled looks, some moving away in silence pondering, while others searching for the next subject to debate. But Paul is not dissuaded. Using his God-given gifts of speech and persistence, he continues to bring his A-game to the debate so that some of the listeners respond, "We will hear you again about this." It is a crack in the door which he won't waste. By the end of the day, two who have been groping for God grab hold and dive in, moving from shallow to deeper relationships with God and each other.

Paul's interaction invites us to consider what are the gifts we possess that may get overlooked when we ponder what shall we offer to God? Can we embrace the gifts of someone with whom we disagree? Are we willing to share what we believe through connecting our commonalities with someone utterly different from us? Maya Angelou was famous for

reminding us that we on this earth have far more in common than we have different. In such a time as this, we must all work together to equip and encourage each other so that we can bring our whole selves into the Body of Christ, including all of our gifts, many of which have yet to be discovered or put to good use. Our story today asks of us – where have you searched, even groped for God, who come to find out is right here, with us and within us? And in discovering such meaning and purpose not once, but again and again, how will you respond to the One “in whom we live and move and have our being”?