



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Wrestling the gods"

Acts 17:16-34 , Psalm 23, Luke 3:1-13

Will Sparks February 22, 2015

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Would you say that you are a religious person? That is a bit of a trap question- a hot button in these days in which it is just not cool to be religious but it is very cool to be spiritual. Claiming to be religious is like claiming to be a Knight Templar- like a member of some archaic weird club. Religion is considered anachronistic these days. If you are religious you are somehow institutional, stuck in your ways, and most likely closed minded. So most people these days, if asked if they are religious will say, "Certainly not." But they may well claim to be spiritual.

The apostle Paul was walking through the streets of ancient Athens, he would have likely passed the Theatre of Dionysia, dedicated to the god of wine. He would have looked up at the Acropolis, dedicated to Athena. He would have walked past Olympian statuary dedicated to the supreme god Zeus. And according to Acts, he passed many other shrines to many other deities. And he said to those around him, "I see you are a very religious people." So many shrines to so many gods. And you are even hedging your bets, creating a shrine to an unknown god, a generic shrine in case not all the religious bases are covered with all the other shines- in case there is a divine force out there that is not recognized.

* Downtown church surrounded by high-rises.

My question is, if Paul were walking through a modern 21st century city like ours, would he judge us to be religious? It is absolutely true that our communities are not anywhere near as visually dominated by shrines and places of worship as they used to be. It used to be that when you arrived at a city, you could look around and the horizon was dotted by church spires- recognizable signs of religious practice and faith. These were the buildings that Paul would have seen 50 years ago. But today, what would he say? Would he see evidence of devotion to deities that we devote ourselves to in hopes that they will save us?

Because that is what religion really is right. Religion is devotion to a particular deity or god, or system of belief, or faith trusting that it is real, that that is what reality is made of, and trusting that this religious practice will serve your life, or your community or the world. A religion is a worldview, a lens through which we see and then construct the world. Religion asks us to practice a set of habits out of devotion to that worldview, and that god.

It is not a very popular position these days but I believe we human beings are hard wired for religion. I think that bred in the bone of humans is the need to trust something, to believe in something. We need, somehow, to make sense of human frailty, vulnerability and suffering. And in this time of deep mistrust of organized religion, (and organized religion has not always been very worthy of trust) I believe that need, that hard wiring has not simply gone away. I think we are as religious as we ever have been but we are placing our trust in other things, other world-views, other gods, other systems of belief. I think Paul might walk through the modern city and look up and see the banking towers and call us very religious- hugely devoted to the market. I mean, everyone, me included, entrusts our life savings to this mysterious and unseen thing called the market. And the question, "are you saved?" That's a good question. Saved from insecurity.

Saved from poverty? Well, if we practice the gospel of accumulation we will be saved. That sounds very religious.

Paul might look at the mega-malls that we have and say, "wow. What devotion! what religious rituals that surround these temples: rituals of advertising, seeking sales. There are high holy days like Black Friday, Boxing Day, and what widespread observance. Come all who are hungry and thirsty, and I will satisfy."

Paul might look at our sports stadiums and see all kinds of signs of religious observance. The devotees dress in the colors of their denomination every time, faithfully. We talk about devotion to the team and the game. Paul would be fascinated by the complex rituals of Super bowl Sunday. Frankly, I love to go to Canucks games with Kendrick because you get caught up in the ritual of it. You feel like you are part of something bigger. The songs that everybody knows and chants draw you in. When I go, I am struck by how it appeals to similar parts of my psyche. I believe these places and events are extremely religious.

Now I have to say that these activities: banking, saving, RRSPs, there is nothing wrong with them as activities. There have always been trading places, markets. Gosh, Olympia had an amazing complex of stadia for sport competition. But I believe we fool ourselves if we think these are not religious, that they are not rife with faith claims- that they appeal to us, and try to draw us into religious faith. They offer devotion to gods of competition, salvation through accumulation, and I haven't even mentioned the gospel of military might which is being preached in the news daily.

We all participate at some level in these other religious systems. We all bump up against these other gods regularly.

This season of Lent I am inviting you to consider all the gods that you bump up against in your life and the claims of salvation that they make- the claims on your heart and your life that they make. We wrestle with the gods of our world just like Jesus wrestled with the tempter in the wilderness. They promise us security, happiness, satisfaction, abundant life. They don't deliver.

So I want to invite you to spend some time with me during this season of Lent, on Sundays during the sermon time, as we follow the teachings and story of Jesus that leads us to the cross and the events of Easter, to consider the gods we wrestle with in our lives, who make subtle claims on our hearts and on our lives, and listen to the hungers that they claim to address. Because I think deep in our hearts we know that all these other gods we offer our time and treasure and life energy and devotion to are not real, and may feel like they satisfy our deep needs and questions in the short haul, but in the end leave us just as hungry as ever.

But we have a different way, an alternative gospel. Our worship life is a practice of devotion to the God who is real, and whose ways do satisfy. We live with and wrestle with the gods of our culture all the time- our culture is thoroughly religious. But we don't have to give these gods our life. We will not give our lives away so easily, to gods made of human hands. Why not? Because we choose to offer our lives to God, who is real, who is not made by human hands, who is love, whose ways are compassion, justice and peace. The Lord is my shepherd, not the market, or the military, or the mall, or the easy answer. No, the Lord of love is my shepherd, and I already have everything I need.

Amen.