

Sermon for May 14, 2023

Acts 17: 29

“Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.”

In Athens, Paul addresses people he describes as “extremely religious,” saying they do not know God, that God cannot be not found among the “objects of [their]worship” throughout their city.

Don’t we all find God in “the art and imagination of mortals”?

Teaching Sunday School on ZOOM, I was able to share art that represented Biblical scenes and ask questions such as, “Was Mary really dressed in a Renaissance gown at the Annunciation?” I shared contemporary art and images from many different cultures, getting at the truth that each of us projects ourselves when we imagine God, that history and geography shape our beliefs.

Today we understand the parables of Jesus, even though His examples relate to a very different society, one with communal wells, shepherds, and fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee. We are grateful that God became man, in the person of Jesus, and that he continues to teach us through His words and His example. As we hear in 1Peter, “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” This is the hope that is in us.

We realize that Christian churches reflect the historic structure of inherited monarchy, with references to Pharaohs, Emperors, and Kings. We understand why the roles of men and women emerged from a patriarchic system. We also know that, as our consciousness about human justice and equality has evolved, so must our experience of God and of Church.

How do we know God? Who is God? Who is Jesus? One of the children asked me, as we prepared for Holy Week and Easter, “Is He the Son of God or is He God?” Such a good question.

He is both, and so much more. There are more questions to ask: where am I in the image of God? Where is the “she” in God? Surely a woman is also made in the image of God.

I was uncertain about standing in the pulpit. It felt like too much. But, last Sunday, as I watched Keri walk up the steps and begin to speak, I thought of the women in my family who had devoted their lives to their religious beliefs. My 97-year-old mother is a pious woman: she sent her children to parochial schools. When she has trouble falling asleep, she takes out her rosary. She thanks God for her blessings and has always found strength in God when facing life’s challenges. Our opening hymn this morning underlines her faith: “When human hearts are breaking under sorrow’s iron rod, then we find that self-same aching deep within the heart of God.”

I grew up with several examples of women in religious life; three aunts, two great aunts, and one great-great aunt were Catholic nuns. Wouldn’t they want to see me in the pulpit? Aren’t they blessing me today?

I was especially close to my Aunt Pat, Sister Marie Aimee, a cloistered nun in the Visitation order. I visited the monastery in Brooklyn even before Aunt Pat entered the order because my great aunt, Sister Mary Loretto, was a member. Visits to the monastery were memorable occasions – we sat in a parlor next to a wrought-iron grill, behind which were our relative and the other sisters. Only Great Aunt Loretto’s face was visible; the other nuns had veils covering their faces. But they chatted and poked their fingers through the bars to touch us kids. I remember opening a wooden door that was a Lazy Susan – in the cabinet was a doll for me! I remember a “silent butler” in the wall. Opening that door revealed a tray of snacks.

Later, the convent was more open. What remained constant was that in that place I felt loved. Aunt Pat was funny and smart, and she expressed her love very generously. She wrote to me, including beautiful holy cards and reminders that I was always in her prayers. Once she gave me a tour of the elementary school in Brooklyn. She had retired from teaching and school administration, but still gave religion classes to the older children. She wanted me to meet her students and see their work. On a bulletin board, I saw examples of student writing. Each

short essay was about God's love. Aunt Pat called it "Salesian philosophy," based on the teachings of Francis de Sales.

This week I did some research about the Visitation order, founded in the 1600s in France by a bishop, Francis de Sales. His response to a petition by a widow who had raised her children and wanted to enter religious life was to create an order that would encourage such vocations, and he put the widow in charge. She was St. Jane de Chantel. Together they proclaimed the motto, "Live Jesus," through the virtues of humility and gentleness. These characteristics imbued the group of women I knew.

I also learned that the Visitation sisters in Mobile, Alabama have been making candy for more than sixty years. It is called "Heavenly Hash" and is described as a concoction of chocolate, marshmallows, and pecans. How sweet is that? And why did I never taste it? On their website, I saw an image of Sister Mary Loretto Franklin's grave in Mobile. She had been the "Mother General" of the order.

Being an Episcopal church woman, standing in this pulpit, speaking to my parish, I honor the women in my family who taught me the religion I want to preach. They were an important influence in my own imaginings of who God is. "How Great Thou Art," God who is beyond our limited understanding.

When we look for God, do we look inside ourselves? As a parent and a teacher at a Quaker school, I embraced the Quaker concept that there is that of God in every person. I learned that people do not necessarily show you the God-ness, the goodness within. Sometimes they hide it very well. I learned that it is our job to search for that of God in other people, and it helped me to frame conversations with my daughters when they struggled with friendship issues. It helps me to approach the directive from Jesus to love my enemies!

And it helps me find that of God within myself. As a child, I saw my personal connection to God inside myself defined by my soul. And when I thought about my soul, I pictured a record of my sins. Encouraged to examine my conscience and dig out every instance of disobedience, disrespect, selfishness, and untruth. I believed God could see my soul, speckled with splotches of sin. I didn't understand that God loved me.

When I decided to look seriously at the Episcopal church, I took my youngest child with me to a parish I knew about through friends. I had attended two funerals at this church, St. Columba's in Washington, DC, one for a child, the other for a friend. It felt right. But it was important to me that my daughter also feel comfortable with this decision. That Sunday, a woman priest presided at the service, and we both said yes. A door opened to a new way to worship God.

I have been fortunate to have had several women serve as rectors at churches I attend. Believe me, I never take this for granted. This is a precious gift that I cherish. My husband and I arrived at St. Thomas's just when Keri started out as priest in charge. Throughout these nearly eight years, I have worked with Keri in Sunday School, in small groups, on the Day School Board, on Vestry, and —yes—on the Christmas pageant. I am grateful for her leadership and her guidance, and I wish her well. I don't want to say goodbye, but I will.

In the Gospel today, from John, we hear Jesus say, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." Similarly, Keri will always be a part of St. Thomas's.

I believe that we have solid lay leadership here, that the Wardens and the Vestry and the people of this parish will prepare the way for a bright future. We will write the next chapter. I take comfort in the words that Keri used to end her sermon a few weeks ago, "Thank God, we are miraculously and marvelously varied. Together, we are all that we need; together, we are all that God needs."

And I take comfort in the words of today's psalm, #66, "Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld his love from me."

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