

August 11, 2019
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

First Presbyterian Church
21 Church Street
Pittsford, NY 14534
www.pittsfordpres.org
(585) 586-5688

Rev. Dr. Roderic P. Frohman

PROMISCUOUS HOMAGE

Acts 17: 16-34

John Calvin, who died in 1564, had a very interesting statement, which you'll find quoted on the front of your bulletin:

"All men [people] promiscuously do homage to God but very few reverence God."¹

Promiscuous homage is more than just paying lip service to one's ultimate concern. It is a reductionist practice of religion that seeks to be easily bought and sold in the market place of simple religious ideas.

In our culture we see promiscuous homage of God frequently displayed on Facebook, T-Shirts and bumper stickers of religious content. Some are current, and nastily funny like this one: "Come the rapture, may I have your car?" Or clever but dumb like, "Caution! Non-exposure to the Son will cause burning." Or the theologically ignorant: "Don't make me come down there, God," as if God was not already "down" here.

In our New Testament lesson today from the book of Acts, we have a display of classical Greek promiscuous homage in Athens atop Mars Hill where the Areopagus was located. Luke, the editor/composer of Acts is clear in his opinion about what went on in that environment, "They had no time for anything but talking or hearing about something new", which seems to be a fairly cynical and reductionist summary of the activity of one of the greatest debating societies in the ancient world.

Since most inquiring minds want to know, there were two sides in this ancient Athenian debating society, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Both philosophical traditions were at least 300 years old by the time of St. Paul. "For Epicureans, the highest pleasure (tranquility and freedom from fear) was obtained by knowledge, friendship, and living a virtuous and temperate life. They lauded the enjoyment of simple pleasures, by which was meant abstaining from bodily desires, such as sex and chocolate. It verged on asceticism." Their main opponent was the Stoics.²

"The core doctrine of Stoicism concerns the relationship between free will and determinism. [And the Stoics were determined to have free will.]

¹ , Calvin, John, Institutes of the Christian Religion volume 1 page 42, 1960, Philadelphia, Westminster Press.

² Wikipedia: "Epicureanism"

“In the life of the individual Stoic, virtue is the sole good; such things as health, happiness, possessions, are of no account. [Hence the popular understanding of being “stoic.”] A person may become poor, but what of it? He or she can still be virtuous. An individual may be sentenced to death, but he can die nobly, like Socrates. Stoics felt that everyone has perfect freedom, and therefore can strive to be free from mundane desires.”³

Into this rarefied debating atmosphere strolls Paul, [about 51 AD] the architect of early Christianity, a pharisaic Jew converted to the Jesus movement. Paul had apparently drawn the attention of the Stoics and Epicureans in the synagogues of Athens and had been invited up to Mars Hill. But it wasn't exactly a friendly invitation because as we know from our reading, he was called a "babbler," which in Greek means, a "magpie", [the bird] and a "picker of seeds". He was also called a "propagandist of foreign deities".

So here's his big chance. The apostle to the Gentiles is moving out of the synagogue into the secular big time, up to the Areopagus, no less. It is an opportunity to "Face the Nation" and "Meet the Press."

Paul, as presented in our NT lesson, could be called a "semiotician," [seamy-a-tician] a person who decodes what the average person misses in a culture. Semiotics is a *general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function.*⁴

Paul was pretty good at reading the signs of the times. He had seen the nobility of the Athenians' experiment, but the statue to the "unknown god" in downtown Athens had caught his attention like a blaring bumper sticker. The statue to the unknown god revealed a promiscuous homage. The Athenians were hedging their theological bets. They had statues to many other gods, so why not one to the "unknown god" just in case one was omitted. So Paul does a little theologizing of his own. As the text says:

He stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For, as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. Then he launched into his classic three point sermon.

Point # 1

- "God is the one who made the world and everything in it". Well, the philosophers of the Areopagus believed that the world may have been authored, but that was mostly accidental. Paul continues:

Point # 2

- "God gives all people life and breath and everything". But Paul's audience didn't need God. They got along just fine without God getting too close, thank you very much.

Point # 3

- Paul bores in about this intimate deity, quoting authors known to his audience such as, Epimenides of Knossos⁵, a sixth century B.C. philosopher, who said, "In God we live and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Webster's Dictionary

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epimenides>

move and have our being", and Aratus of Cilicia⁶, a Stoic third century B.C. philosopher who had famously opined, "We are all God's children".

Paul affirmed the value of searching for God and for God's presence. But he also testified to the nearness of God. God is closer than even the greatest imagination can conceive. Paul said, God is already at home in us and with us through Jesus the Christ.

And it is at THIS point that Paul gets into trouble with the Athenians because he tells them they need to repent of their promiscuous homage of attempting to manufacture a home for God either intellectually in their own heads or aesthetically, with all the beautiful sculpture in their city.

The Athenian debating society didn't want to be told to repent or change to be reconciled to God, at least not from this seed-picking magpie. The Greeks don't want to repent because they cannot conceive of a God who would respect a repenting, vulnerable mortal, let alone care for one.

Paul gets into further trouble when he decides to add Point # 4, the resurrection. To the Christians the Resurrection is the supreme testimony that God is user-friendly to the human race.

"For Greeks in particular, the notion of resurrection seemed both impossible and downright offensive. To affirm that God raised Jesus from the dead is to acknowledge once and for all that life itself belongs to God. And there is the rub of Paul's sermon. For the Athenians, as for the remainder of humankind, acknowledging that God made us and sustains us [means that] we are never alone."⁷ God is as close as the air we breathe.

Well, as one can imagine, Paul got mixed reviews. The story says, "some scoffed, but others said, 'we will hear you again about this'," -- a polite brush off at best-- but the writer tells us that some of them joined Paul and became believers. Not bad for a little street corner preaching.

If all life belongs to God, then like Paul in Athens, we are called to discern where our homage to God is promiscuous. That is: Christians are called to look at our culture in depth to see it for what it is. We are called to notice the "unknown gods" of our culture. We are called to be semioticians, people who decode culture. Sometimes we call this decoding, "discernment."

As Christians we need to re-discover cultural discernment. Discernment is not just for personal introspection any more. Discernment is the ability to evaluate, not only ourselves, but our culture in light of the Christian story.

There are many signs, symbols, and idols of modern times, to which we Americans give promiscuous homage carelessly or carefully. Some of these idols are: the television, the gun, the flag, the border, citizenship, white privilege, gender, the game, the athlete, the computer, the cell phone, the body, the mall, the car, to name a few.

So, how in the midst of the rule of these gods of culture can we see the God of our Lord Jesus at work? Alternatively, what are the signs and symbols of God's presence?

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aratus>

⁷ Beverley Gaventa, Christian Century, "Life Comes From God" April 28, 1993

In Christian worship we affirm many signs and symbols of God's saving presence: Table, bread, cup, the font [especially today!], the cross, the pulpit, the Bible, the sanctuary.

These are wonderful signs of God's presence. But if they stay in the church building because American culture tells us to keep them private, or because we don't know what they mean, or because we are embarrassed by them, then those other symbols out there—the television, the gun, the flag, the border, citizenship, white privilege, gender, the game, the athlete, the computer, the cell phone, the body, the mall, the car—then they become the dominant teaching and forming values of our lives, our idols, our “unknown gods”.

What are we supposed to do then? Like Paul, we take the symbols out of the church closet and into the street, out of a private religious life and into the marketplace and translate them.

Doing this translation we find:

- the communion table becomes a food cupboard,
- the sanctuary becomes a shelter for refugees and the homeless,
- the cross becomes our identification with suffering of all sorts,
- the pulpit becomes the message that the poor and the oppressed are to be set free,
- the baptismal font becomes the cleansing of our society of evils,
- the healing of Jesus becomes a hospital.

Ultimately, what we think about God shapes how we discern what goes on in our society, how we treat others. The converse is also true: how we treat others reveals what we really believe about God. Promiscuous homage of God can be a carefully practiced hypocrisy. Or maybe it is not so carefully practiced, like this.

A woman was being tailgated by a stressed-out man on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of her. She did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though she could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating man was furious at being stuck at the light and so honked his horn, screaming in frustration, as he missed his chance to get through the intersection. Of course he dropped his cell phone and spilled his coffee, while giving rude gestures.

As he was still in mid-rant, he heard a tap on his window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered him to exit his car with his hands up. He was patted down and handcuffed and told to stand beside the road. The policeman got back in his car and got on his computer. After about 15 minutes he got out of his police car and took off the man's handcuffs, apologized and told him he was free to go.

The police officer said, “I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car. While you were blowing your horn, flipping off the woman in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at her, I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk; so naturally...I assumed you had stolen the car.”