

The Sixth Sunday after Easter

“The Spi’it ‘n’ Image of God”

by Mary Anne Biggs

May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22-31 ~ John 14:15-21

My very favorite hospital visit is to the maternity wing. I just love going, but sometimes I have to be really nimble because babies are born one minute and then it seems like they are scooted out the door the next. I remember the days when a typical maternity stay was at least three days. My mother told me that when I was born she stayed in the hospital for two weeks ... maybe that's because they knew who would be going home with her and figured she would need all the rest she could get.

I really like to visit when grandma and grandpa are there because they always seem to know who the baby looks like. My friend Brian used to say that all babies look like Dwight Eisenhower, but Grandma holds the little bundle up and says, “Isn’t he the spitting image of his dad?” (her son, of course!). And her son never says, “Oh, no, Mom thinks I’m bald and pudgy and incontinent.” No, he beams with pride.

In one of William Safire’s columns “On Language” he traced the origin of the phrase “spitting image.” It’s a shortened form of “spirit and image” – spi’it ‘n’ image – meaning one not only looks like their parents, but acts like them, too ... that they are identical not only in appearance but in character and essence.

The New Testament claims that the carpenter from Nazareth was the Spi’it ‘n’ image of God. And it claims further that we, his followers, are the Spi’it ‘n’ image of God, too. This claim was a scandal to the Gentiles and a blasphemy to the Jews, but the early church embraced it. And Christians have been working out what it means ever since. It all has to do with how we imagine God.

Paul’s speech on the Areopagus in Athens ... that we heard in our reading in Acts ... has long been a fascination in the church. After being chased out of Thessalonica, Paul came to Athens alone, where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. Paul was well-traveled and well-educated for his day. Still, Athens must have intimidated him a little. Athens was a world city ... the ancient cultural capital of the Mediterranean world ... known for its philosophy and art and love of learning.

Life in Athens revolved around three places: the Agora, the Acropolis, and the Areopagus. The Agora was the economic center, the marketplace, in the center of the city. The Acropolis was the spiritual center, the high flat hill where the Parthenon and other temples to various deities stood. The Areopagus, literally “Mars Hill” was the educational center, and in Paul’s day, the Areopagus was still a gathering place for philosophical debate. And that’s where the apostle chose to preach his gospel.

No doubt, some things about Athens would have been uncomfortable to a lifelong Jew like Paul. So many temples and shrines to different deities ... the variety of cults and religious rituals ... especially the many idols and statues would have bothered Paul as a strict monotheist.

The Jews were particularly sensitive to God's command about graven images. They nearly revolted in mass when the Roman army marched into the Temple precincts in Jerusalem with the Roman eagle on their flag standards ... it was a desecration! The Jews even objected to using coins of the empire to pay their taxes because the coins had the Caesar's graven image on them. So you can imagine how Paul must have felt seeing all the idols and images in Athens, no matter how lovely they might have been. Still, according to Luke, Paul was struck by the rich spirituality of the Athenians. Yet how could he explain to these Gentiles his beliefs about Jesus as the Jewish Messiah?

Paul begins by seeking a common ground in their mutual beliefs about God. His sermon is more theological than Christological, that is, it is more about God than about Christ. He connects with their spirituality by appealing to their shrine to "the unknown god," the ancient way of making sure you covered all your bases, just in case. They didn't want to offend any deities by leaving them out.

Paul's speech falls into two parts. The first is his affirmation of a providential God who is the Creator of all things and the guarantor of natural order. He describes a singular God who created all nations and peoples. This was a belief widely held not only by Jews, but by the Stoic philosophy of the day. The second part of the speech is Paul's contention that this God is the supreme Judge who will reward the good and punish the evil in the life to come. This belief also was held in common by some Jews and by the Stoics. But the Epicureans ... another school of thought in those days ... did not believe in a providential God or in a God who judged. Since, like the Jewish Sadducees, they did not believe in life after death, they did not believe in the moral accountability of a judgment after death.

And although Paul is in an unusual environment in this story ... an all Gentile audience ... Luke shows us that these Greeks aren't so different from the Jews that Paul has been addressing in synagogue after synagogue and will address again later in Acts. That is, they fit the same pattern of response to the gospel as his Jewish hearers. Some of the Pharisees and the Stoics respond positively, while others ... the Sadducees and the Epicureans ... reject the gospel out of hand because they do not believe in resurrection. And since Paul's speech is more about God than Christ, the story suggests that those who reject the gospel do so more because they can't believe in the God who sent Jesus ... rather than not being able to believe in Jesus.

Marcus Borg noted two images of God in conflict here ... images which also conflict within the Bible and the Church. The first, which he calls supernatural theism, tends to take human metaphors of God too literally ... God as "Father," as "Shepherd," as "King," and so on. Hence, God is imagined as a supernatural being "out there" ... a being set apart from creation ... who intervenes from time to time in dramatic fashion ... but who is generally not here ... but up there ... or out there somewhere watching and listening.

The other way of imagining God he identifies as panentheism. Panentheism sees the spiritual as permeating the material world ... and coexisting simultaneously within it. As Paul says to the Athenians, quoting a Stoic poet: “In God we live and move and have our being.” This image of God ... experiences God ... not as *occasionally* present ... but *always* present. It uses images like “wind” and “breath” to describe God’s invisible, immediate, and essential presence. God is not “up there” or “out there” watching from afar ... but is now and always right here participating in every event. This is the image of God that Paul describes on the Areopagus.

As I said, the Jews objected to idols, which not only disobeyed God’s command but confused the material with the Divine world. We still suffer from that confusion in the way we worship things and make them more important than people. But Jews and Christians did remember from the story of creation in Genesis one that God created humankind, male and female, in God’s image. They believed also that the Spirit of God would dwell among God’s people, such that the Psalmist could declare “where can I get away from Your Spirit?” (Psalm 139:7) or the prophet Isaiah could say, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Isa 61:1). In fact, Luke is the evangelist who remembers Jesus quoting those very words (Luke 4:18) in his first sermon to the home town synagogue at Nazareth. And what does God say when Jesus rises from the waters of baptism and God’s Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove? “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Hence, Jesus bears the “Sp’it ‘n’ image” of the God who sent him. Hence, God’s own people bear the “Sp’it ‘n’ image” of their Creator God. Hence, the Church is literally called “the body of Christ” and is filled with his Spirit.

To be sure, the Church has always believed Jesus unique in this regard. No one else has ever been the “Sp’it ‘n’ image” of God so perfectly as Jesus. But still, we are *called* to be like Jesus ... to imitate his way of being in the world ... his faith ... his compassion ... his love. The scholars use the word Incarnation to describe this way of God being intermingled ... not imprisoned ... not captured ... not controlled ... but interacting with human flesh. This incarnation was perfect in Jesus. By comparison, we reflect God like so many funhouse mirrors ... distorted ... out of balance ... imperfectly ... too often even incorrectly. Therefore, to say we are made in God’s image and the Spirit of God is within us is never just a grandiose boast for us to make. Rather, it is a humbling, holy calling. We fall so short, so often. And yet, it is the “Sp’it ‘n’ image” of God that we are called to bear. “This is the Spirit of Truth,” Jesus says in John. “You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you (John 14:17). Paul says elsewhere that our bodies are God’s Temple, where the Spirit of God dwells (1 Cor 6:19). And that is also why we are called to live holy lives ... to love each other ... to treat all people reverently ... and to look for God’s presence and self-disclosure in other people.

Can you imagine how God feels when you imitate God’s love for the broken and the downcast ... for the lost and the lonely ... for the despised and the rejected? Can you imagine God’s response when Jesus holds you before God and says, “Now this one is your “Sp’it ‘n’ image!” I think I know what God does. I think God beams!

I suppose we all fluctuate between imagining a God who is “out there” and a God who is “everywhere.” There is a lot about the Bible and theology that I just can’t get my head around. Wherever and whatever God is, God is more than any of us can comprehend. But the ideas about God that the Bible makes so very plain is that God loves each of us ...and keeps us

in mind ... and that it is possible for us ... by the way we live ... and the way we love ... to please God. Beloved, you are the “Sp’it ‘n’ image” of God. This is your identity. This is your mission. This is your glory. This is your story. Live up to it! Live in to it!

May we pray?

Living God, you are so good to us. What an honor that we should be made in your image. What a privilege, that we should carry your Spirit, so to show you to the world. Help us to live up to that high calling. However imperfectly and beyond our human weakness, may others see you in us, hear you in us, be loved by you in us. And may what you see and hear in us be pleasing in your sight through Jesus Christ our Model and our Mentor, our Savior and our God. Amen.