

Pilgrim Church of Duxbury
Imagine This
Acts 17: ` 16-34
May 28, 2017
Rev. Peggy O'Connor

Today we wind up our May sermon series on the empty cross and what it means to believe in an invisible God. I think you will all agree that faith in God the Creator became easier when Jesus was alive. He taught people about God and what a faith filled life looks like. I can only imagine what it must have been like to hear Jesus speak...to see his patience and caring...to watch as he helped all manner of people heal and be reunited into the community. But then he was crucified. Without him, his followers almost disbanded. To their great relief he returned, risen from the dead. It was a miracle. They rejoiced and he told them to spread the good news and to bring people into closer relationship with God. Then, promising to return some day, he disappeared. Two thousand years later we have to figure out how to believe and follow our invisible God without Jesus' presence. Thankfully today's passage gives us some clues about how to do this. .

As you have just heard, Paul was in Athens. He was waiting for his friends Silas and Timothy and had some free time on his hands so he took a tour of the religious shrines and statues of Athens...of which there were scores. As he walked through the city, ancient even then, he was distressed by the number of statues of gods and goddesses, which people worshipped with food offerings, clothing and other items that they believed they needed

and wanted. So Paul did what he always did...he headed to the synagogue to speak with the Jews of Athens. No doubt they too shook their heads in agreement as Paul spoke about statues. How they reacted to his teaching about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus we do not know, but most assuredly he told them.

We do know that after speaking in the synagogue, Paul went to the market place and spoke to anyone who would listen about God the Creator and the resurrection of Jesus. Some who heard him said he was a "babbling" or in Greek a 'spermologos' meaning a person who, like a bird gathering seeds haphazardly, collects ideas indiscriminately. Their words are a babble of concepts that make no sense. But others, especially the philosophers, were intrigued. Greece and especially Athens was the home of, arguably, the greatest collection of philosophers. They loved to spend their days debating ideas. So they invited Paul to the Areopagus...where the most ancient of Greek courts had met and was still used to hear important cases. The Philosophers used it to debate philosophical, religious and metaphysical ideas.

The Areopagus is an impressively large outcropping of rock that stands some 600 feet above the Athens. Here, with sweeping views of the city, Paul was asked about this new teaching which, they said, "sound rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means."

Paul began by congratulating the people of Athens for being deeply religious. He told them how he had toured Athens, examining the objects of their worship. He noted that they even had an altar to "an unknown god." I imagine his audience felt proud of their city as they listened. Records show that there were many temples and statues of the gods throughout the city and that people visited the temples and shrines often. So, I imagine that the people listening to Paul were happy with his report of what he found.

Then Paul said: What you worship as unknown, I declare is the God who made the world and everything in it. This was a new concept to the people. This was a god they had never heard of or imagined. Even the philosophers were stunned.

Paul went on, asking them to imagine this God. He tells them that the God of creation does not live in shrines and is not served by their offerings of food and clothing. In fact, says Paul, this God needs nothing from us. For this God is the creator of life...human and every other form of life as well.

Imagine this says Paul...God created all nations...from one ancestor...for a purpose...to inhabit all of creation. And God allotted each one a time and place...hoping that they would search for God... grope for God... and maybe even to find God. For this Creator God is not absent or distant This God...THE God...is concerned and caring and wants to have a relationship with each of us.

Imagine says Paul...God is not far from us...for as you know, "in God we live and move and have our being...which is a quote from an ancient Greek philosopher. How clever of Paul, to quote one of their own to prove his point. For good measure he added another quote, this time from a 3rd Century BCE poet, "For we too are God's offspring."

Having set up an argument that is supported not just by his ideas but those of their own philosophers and poets, Paul proceeds to tell the crowd what it all means. Since God made us and all of creation, God cannot be a gold, silver, wood or stone statue made by human hands. In other words, the God who created the universe and everything in it is not one of your gods. But don't worry, says Paul, God has forgiven your error. However, God is now calling you to account. The day approaches when the world will be judged by God's appointed one...Jesus, who was crucified and then raised from the dead.

Some scoffed at the idea of the resurrection...they could not imagine it. Others were intrigued and said they would come back to hear more. A few followed Paul as he left the Areopagus because what they had imagined called to them as nothing ever had and they wanted to embrace it.

This my friends is how we follow an unseen God. We allow ourselves to imagine the pure love of God...the timeless patience of God... the deeply rooted compassion of God...the overflowing joy of God...the breath taking kindness of God...the never ending generosity of God...the unnecessary

beauty and diversity of everything God creates...and the blinding hope that God offers. In imagining we are swept up in the dream of the kingdom of God...a vision that takes our breath away and makes our hearts ache with longing. This is a vision...that ignites our imagination, which fuels our desire to follow...to become a part of the Way to truth and light.

This is what keeps us coming back to church. We want to remember the vision...we want to have our imaginations recharged...we *need* to have our imaginations recharged because the world we live in is so very different. We teach our children to share...we teach them the gold rule...we teach them to love their neighbors as themselves...then we send them out into a world that eschews one for all and all for one and embraces every man for themselves and our heart aches for them. All too often we feel defeated by the world. But here...we can reconnect to the hope and the dream that feeds our souls and fuels our recommitment every week to live our lives in ways that bear testament to our faith and our vision of the beloved community of love and inclusion and peace.

As I wrote this sermon the image of Professor Harold Hill, from the 1957 musical, *The Music Man* came to me repeatedly. I worried that my theme of imagining and my positing that imagining is the key to accepting faith, would sound like his "think system" for learning to play an instrument. It was a scam that promised that you could learn to play an instrument without learning to read music...you just had to think the melody. But the more I

thought about it the more I realized that in fact, Harold Hill's method, while originally conceived of as a scam, did almost exactly what he said it would do...it changed people for the better. It changed Hill, who fell in love and decided to give up his life of lies and deceit. It changed the librarian who like a butterfly emerged from her lonely cocoon and allowed herself to love. It change the children of the town who became more self-assured and well behaved. And it did all these things by simply asking people to imagine what they could become.

Faith starts with our being captured by a dream of an alternative way of life. It pulls us in because we can imagine it and we can imagine ourselves as a part of it. It ignites within us the desire to pursue it. Yes, over time we need to study it and learn more about it...we need to grapple with its inconsistencies and contradictions...we need to question it...doubt it...and then be won over by it again and again...but first...and foremost...to follow the God of Creation...we must imagine and allow our imaginations to be ignited by what seems impossible...impossible to be realized and impossible to not pursue.

Imagine!