

Sermon 'Live On' – Final Draft – May 17th, 2020

To all those who are graduating – whether it be from high school, college, graduate school, or from middle school to high school, congratulations! This is the time of year for commencement speeches and practical advice from leaders in our country. I have heard many commencement speeches and can't say that I remember anything from any of mine. I was too caught up in the excitement of graduating. I do remember one of my daughter's high school graduating commencement speeches where the principal told everyone to make their bed every day. That one stuck with me – because that was the expectation in the house where I grew up.

What would God's commencement speech be? I think we have 66 books of the Bible to give us some idea, and that certainly would be a speech that we would all remember. One thing that God does is to speak from within our context. We see Jesus doing this in the gospels, and that is what Paul is doing here in our story from Acts.

Paul finds himself in the city of Athens, Greece. It is there that he is distressed by the idolatry in the city. He sees many pagan altars (or idols) made for worship. One of the them is made to an unknown God and Paul speaks to the people of Athens about it. You see, the Greeks were afraid of missing a God, so they made an altar to an unknown God. Just in case a God was overlooked, they surmised, we got that covered.

I think what Paul is doing here is good advice for all of us. Paul is working out of his current context. He is not in the familiar place of being with fellow believers in one of the early Christian churches. He is with people steeped in idol worship, who do not know the God that

Paul, you, and I worship. He is like many of us in the world today. My challenge for us is to be like Paul in Athens and to look for God in our current context – wherever we find ourselves.

Finding himself in a foreign city, Paul takes an assessment of what is going on. He recognizes the religious enthusiasm of the people of Athens- their excitement and intensity around worshipping idols. He picks up on this and steps into it. Paul understands their dedication to serving God. One by one, he surveys the idols and struggles with worshipping all that is not the one true God. Their commitment to worship resonates with him, but not what they are worshipping.

Next, Paul asks himself, "Where is God in all of this?" That is such a critical question that I have learned to ask when I read any Bible story and in my own life. Paul looks at all the altars until he finds God as the one labeled, 'to an unknown God'. This serves as a bridge between this world and the one Paul is familiar with because he is not familiar with this land with an abundance of idols to worship. "There!" Paul says to himself. "I have found God."

Frankly, the Greeks make the answer to the question, "Where is God?" easy for Paul. They have made many altars and labeled one 'to an unknown God.' Paul simply steps into the space of the unknown God.

Today, we do not have it as easy as Paul did in this situation. Now, people worship everything from money to personal achievement. If they worship nature, we may try to step in and say, "What a beautiful gift from God." But then someone quickly chalks it up to science, with no God beyond the science. That makes it tough - to help people see where God is, even when we see it so clearly. Paul had it easy with the altar to the unknown God in Athens.

Paul recognizes what is going on inside of himself. Like a new graduate, he is in an unfamiliar world. The one Paul is familiar with is the Jewish world. Paul is a learned man who is very familiar with the Jewish places of worship (the synagogues) and Jewish law (the Torah). Paul is familiar with his walk with Jesus. Remember his experience of Jesus coming to him on the road to Damascus? Paul recognizes that as he walks amongst all of these idols in Athens, he feels distressed! But he knows that he must find some common ground to make a connection with these people. He knows his own road-map of faith. He understands the message of God through Jesus, but he cannot take these people on that same journey. He must speak to them in their current context.

As many of you know, I am currently in CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). CPE is a chaplaincy program that is a requirement for my seminary education. In CPE, we visit patients as hospital chaplains. When I visit with patients, they are each on a journey, thrown into the disorientation of being in the hospital. Daily lab work, X-rays, and a multitude of strangers walking in and out of their room during all hours of the day is quite disorienting. I am learning that I have to know myself before I can step into the experiences of others. For example, I do not know what it is like to get a diagnosis with an uncertain future, but I do know what it is like to feel scared. I do not know what it is like to be alone as a patient in isolation during a pandemic, but I do know what it feels like to be lonely. Though I do not share the same experience with the patient, I can resonate with the emotion that the patient is feeling, and it is there that I can make a connection with that person in the hospital bed.

Paul names the emotion they share. He owns it and says to them, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." He is saying to them, "I know what it is like to be religious, and I see that in you."

Paul resonates with their emotion. He knows what it is like to want to follow and serve God. Paul sees the zeal of those in Athens to serve a multitude of Gods, and it resonates with his desire to follow Jesus. With Paul's understanding of what he is feeling, he can let go of what is not useful - his own distress amidst the multitude of idols.

Paul identifies God. Paul says, "There he is. The unknown God you have identified". We read in Acts 17:24-25 "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."

Paul goes on to say in verse 28, "For in him we live and move and have our being." That's what we have here at Divinity and in the global church around the world. We live and move and have our being together as the body of Christ. We see God alive and at work in each other. Meanwhile, we live together in this world.

As I take an assessment of what is going on during this pandemic, I see isolated and lonely people. Meanwhile, life and death continue, and we look for God in our current context. Recently, we lost a beloved member of our church – Erik Schumacher. When I heard of his death, I called my parents. I did it to celebrate the life and memory of Erik in my life. Let me give you a little more background.

My parents were married at Bethany Lutheran Church in 1959. In the 1960s, they lived in the neighborhood by Bethany on Bertha Avenue. Erik was a deacon at Bethany, and my parents knew him from the church. Also, my Mom worked at Forest City on Brookpark Road in the 60s and early 70s, and so did Erik Schumacher. As a child, I can still remember visiting my Mom at work and meeting Mr. Schumacher there as well.

My Dad is an electrician. When you work in any of the trades, the church knows it, and skills are shared in the body of Christ. On at least one occasion, my father went over to Erik Schumacher's house to help with some electrical work. My parents knew him, and when my folks would come to worship and hear me preach here at Divinity, Erik Schumacher would be waiting after the service to talk with them.

I wanted to name and share the emotion of sadness over Erik Schumacher's passing with my parents and with my wife, who was also fond of him. I wanted to share in the sorrow of his death with others who knew him and with those who know how strong his faith was and rejoice in how beautiful a person we can be when we let God's spirit fill us. Erik's name and how much we all miss him came up at our recent planning council meeting this past Monday. I want to name where we saw God at work – in Erik Schumacher.

Whether you are graduating this month or not, you will encounter many people who worship themselves or other people. If not worshipping money, you will find people who worship those who make an abundance of money. Commencement means to start or to begin. Do not envy and worship what the world worships. Begin today by worshipping our God, who gives us life and breath, and lives on in this world. Look for where God 'lives on' in your

context, in your life. Name where you see and feel God's presence and influence. Call out and name our God, who desires to live on with us today and into eternity. AMEN