

**6 Easter – Year A – June 1, 2011- Homily**  
**Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:14-21**  
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When we still lived in Austin, and I was attending seminary in that grey zone between a public commitment to pursue ordained ministry and the actual ordination event, which carries with it a certain authority, there's a lot of time to reflect and a lot of opportunities to share the Good News. God usually finds a way to drop these opportunities on us at unexpected moments. Tonight's story is just one of those events.

"Ah, so you're religious then?" she said, with that carefully modulated tone reserved purely for dealing with those likely to have dubious sanity, be potentially unstable, or perhaps even dangerous. "You might say that," I replied, trying hard to put an encouraging inflexion into my voice, while hoping at once to assure her of my calm, non-violent mental state. All while simultaneously wondering whether God would help me out with the right words to say that might touch this woman's heart in the ten minutes I knew it would take for her to finish cutting my hair. Let's just say, with God, all things are possible. Oh, and ten minutes can seem like a very long time, when held captive in a chair by a large black cape! The only other thought that flitted through my mind was that I could pay my bill, walk away, and leave it all in the hands of the Holy Spirit, at least until the next time I needed a haircut.

"Dangerous" is a good word here. Have you *read* the Bible lately? The word of God truly is dangerous, if we take it seriously. Nevertheless, my hairdresser was the one with the scissors. The rule of thumb here is never mess with your hairdresser's head, at least while she's cutting your hair. On the other hand, "religious" is not a good word to describe a Christian. It's the same word Paul uses to describe the Athenians, who worship all kinds of gods. I'm pretty sure he did not mean it to be a compliment, especially after wandering around the city and looking at the numerous shrines, altars and objects of worship to the gods of Rome and the mythical gods of the Hellenistic world.

In the original Greek, the word translated as 'religious' in this portion of Acts, can also be translated as 'superstitious', as it is in the King James translation. In a bad sense the word means superstitious, and in a neutral sense, religious. However, it's worth noting that the only time this particular word is used in the New Testament is in the Book of Acts. In other parts of the New Testament, the word religious is also used, but the Greek used has a more specific and positive translation of religious as Godly, or a life oriented towards God. A modern definition of religious can be found in Webster's New World Dictionary. Here the word is defined as "characterized by adherence to religion or a religion; devout; pious; godly." As a Jewish follower of Christ, Paul is all too aware of the second commandment concerning the making of idols, and highly conscious of God's first commandment about not putting other gods before the One true God. Consequently, Paul's rhetoric barely disguises his response to the numerous idols and images of the gods that he finds all over Athens. Nonetheless, this doesn't deter Paul from sharing the Good News of Christ Jesus, and echoing both John the Baptist's and Jesus' call to repentance.

The implication in Paul's speech is that the first step in finding the One true God, "who created the world and everything that is in it" is sincere repentance. The more I've learned about repentance over the years, the more I consider it to be intimately associated with humility and even courage. It can take a lot of humility to put aside our pride and ego, and truly know what it is to be

a helpless creature of God. It can take a lot of courage to admit we're wrong, and to turn to God, with hearts and minds open enough to really change our ways. Repentance involves change, and as we all know, change is hard for most of us. Yet in the instant we turn to God, we've also opened the door to reconciliation in our relationship with God, and with others. An open door to God makes it possible to truly know God in relationship with Christ Jesus, to receive the power of God's love in our hearts and in our lives, and to accept the gift of healing.

"Ah, so you're religious," she said. It sounds like a rebuke. The words sting like nettles, and bounce off my head like the smack of a stray tennis ball. It feels strange to be having this conversation at the hairdressers, and I wonder again what God wants me to say. Yet isn't this what we're all called to do and be as agents of God's grace in the world? Aren't we equipped to share our faith, just like Peter said we should be, "always ... ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." Paul's eloquent words at the Areopagus can make us feel pretty small. After all, he brilliantly outlines the entire basis of his faith and hope in Christ Jesus in less than three minutes. Now there's a man who knows the value of time and the power of precision in speech. And there it is. It was there all along, of course, even Paul hinted at it. We can grope for God, even search the world, but the miracle is that God is truly not far from us. God is more intimate than we can possibly imagine. You and I are truly blessed with the indwelling Holy Spirit: mighty counselor, guide and teacher, as gentle as a dove, as light as the caress of a breeze, and as dangerous as tongues of fire.

Therein lies the rub at the heart of the 'religious' label. Anyone can say they're religious. Anyone can be spiritually inclined in all kinds of practices. Anyone can be godly. But the question remains what god are they worshipping, to whom are their devotions made? The extremely religious Athenians had many shrines, and a plethora of gods to worship. The world is not so different today. We don't call our gods Zeus, Apollo, Artemis, or Aphrodite, but what about the names of such modern gods as the almighty dollar, alcohol or other addictions, overwork, food, or even a desired address? Christianity is different. It calls us to be different from the world we live in, and in its differences, Christianity is dangerous. Religion per se cannot and does not have the power of salvation. Being religious is not the same as being in relationship *with* God in Christ Jesus. Being religious is not the same as participating in the nature and character of God. Adhering to any number of religions may have nothing to do with being in an intimate relationship with our Creator, or knowing God's Son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

"Ah, so you're religious," she said. "You might say that," I reply, "but it's really about being in relationship with God in Christ Jesus. I love Jesus, and He helps me to love others the way He does."

Dangerous words indeed.

Amen.