

Year A, Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 17, 2020  
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“...so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.”

Good morning everyone. How are you doing? That is an increasingly important question right now. How are you doing? I’ve been on a few Zoom calls this past week with priests in the Diocese and with social safety net folks in Hancock county, and I’ve been talking to folks here at St. Francis, watching the news and my little feed on Facebook, and the temperature has shifted. Not that it will hit 65 today while it snowed last weekend, that is welcome shift, but I think it is setting in that we don’t know how bad this all really is; we don’t know how bad it will really get. Cases are down now, but is this the end? Or an eye in a storm? And all this not knowing... not knowing what is really happening, not knowing what is actually true, not knowing who to trust, not knowing how to parse out partisan/economic self-interest from sound and, perish the thought, wise judgement... that not knowing pushes common decency right off the table, it hampers cooperation, it causes a great deal of stress and anxiety and makes an already hard time just that much harder. I know I’m feeling it. I know colleagues in and out of the church are feeling it. I know a lot of you are feeling it. Of course we are... How are you doing?

Let’s go back 2000 years to St. Paul at the Areopagus in Athens. Most of the sermons that Paul gave in Acts were given to Jewish congregations, most of them were preached in synagogues. Generally those sermons focused on Jesus and the implications of His Messiah-ship, because being Jewish, they knew what he was talking about. They knew the stories of Adam and Eve, and Moses, the Exodus, David and God’s promise of a Messiah. They shared a common knowledge of God revealed as YHWH, “I am becoming what I am becoming.” Paul had theological common ground and shared a religious vocabulary with the fellow Jews to whom he preached.

That was not the case in Athens. There, not only did they not share many cultural connections or know any of the stories or hold in common religious aspirations (such as the notion of a messiah or salvation), they didn’t even have a concept of YHWH-like divinity. It was a completely pagan culture. They had altars dedicated “to a God unknown.”

So there was St. Paul, trying to tell them about his God, our God, who, like the Greek pantheon, is transcendent, unknowable in some ways, sort of like a “God un-knowable.” But a Christian understanding is that God is also manifestly immanent, it is God “in whom we live and

move and have our being.” Paul is great here. “What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you...” If we rely on our senses, our physical senses, ours too is a God unknown. But if we rely on our sense of life and of love, our sense of right and wrong, our sense of common decency... if we rely on experiencing that by and in and through others, especially by and in and through the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ... then we are on to it, on to the way, the right way, the Way, and the Truth and the Life. That is what Paul preached at the Areopagus (what the Romans called Mars Hill), a rocky prominence just across from the Acropolis. I think this tight little sermon can be helpful to us, right now, can help shine some light in this current darkness.

Paul told the Athenians, “From one ancestor he (God) made all the nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted times of their existence and the boundaries of the place where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.”

Paul was talking about the nature of God as well as our ability to understand that God. He is saying that God is not knowable in the way other things are knowable. And according to Paul, this not knowing, this need we have to wrestle, to seek, to “grope” for God is part of the plan, it’s woven into very the fabric of creation. It is right there in the text, we were created and allotted our time and place to exist “so that” we would have to search... Our seeking, our groping, our living with imperfect knowledge and understanding, somehow, has been part of the plan from the beginning. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly...” as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. That is the way it is. Lights shine in the darkness, absolutely, but the darkness, our unknowing, is real, its part of it.

Right now, all of us are groping around in the darkness, all of us, whether we know it or want to admit it or not. We’re groping around trying to figure out how to be in this scared new world. Which of our leaders are telling the truth? Is it safe to return to Maine this year or not? To re-open the economy? To go back to the office? To visit the neighbor, the kids, Marlintoni’s? Is church safe? Do we regather on June 7<sup>th</sup> as the Governor’s rules allow?

The only answer I am sure about is that last one: no. The vestry and I decided that no, June 7<sup>th</sup> is too early, we don’t know enough. We’ll decide in mid-June for a July opening, likely in a large tent we have been offered. Is that the right decision? Yes. Are we sure it isn’t safe? No. But we aren’t sure it is, either. But we don’t need perfect knowledge to know how to live, to make decisions. “I will not leave you orphaned.” Jesus tells us. “In a little while the world will no longer

see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.” We make decisions based on imperfect information all the time. Maybe always.

Seeing Jesus Christ, knowing that as He lives, we also will live... that is the point. In Jesus Christ we are blessed with the ability to know right from wrong. We can have perfect wisdom, perfect Knowledge with a big *K*, even if we don't have perfect information. We don't need to know when this all will end, when (maybe if) things will go back to normal. We don't need to know very much at all to still get along in life; to keep on keeping on. We don't. We've never known all we “need” to know to survive, to live, to thrive, even. Paul said it is part of God's plan, living without knowing the full picture. It is certainly how the world is, us groping around in the dark. In this moment, knowing more would make it a lot easier, but we know how to do this, we humans, we Christians, to live in the shadow of ignorance, the shadow of war, famine, pestilence and death. We know how, you know how, it is in our blood, a gift from God given in Christ by the Holy Spirit. We can do this.

We are all, right now, surviving a trauma. We are, right now, being traumatized. We are being traumatized individually, in our fears, isolation, financial and medical distress. In our loneliness. We are also being traumatized collectively, our whole society is being traumatized, sectors of the economy ravaged, tens of millions unemployed, commodity markets in a shambles, graduating classes adrift. So individually we're drinking more, eating Tradewinds out of chocolate 'n chips; we're lethargic, unmotivated, cranky (some of us are *really* cranky, and short-tempered, and ill-tempered, and bad-tempered). Our minds aren't working right, we can feel muddled. Things that give us joy, don't. Things that never bothered us, do. **ARRGH!!!!** That is trauma happening. Most of us are not at our best.

And collectively, we as far from our best as maybe we have been since the 1850s. We're at each other's throats. We are carrying guns politically. Just when we need each other most, just when we need to come together like we never have before, we are bitterly divided, and at times it seems intentional, we are *being* divided. We are making decisions about public health based on ideology and partisan and financial self-interest. We're abdicating our responsibilities around the world. Together, we are not at our best! That is trauma happening. **ARRGH** indeed!

The good news is that Jesus Christ did not leave us orphaned. In this morass of unknowing, of willful and expedient ignorance, of persistent and existential arrogance, we exist through Jesus Christ in God in whom we live and move and have our beings. That means Easy does it. Cut yourself some slack. Be gentle with yourself. It means yes, your mind maybe isn't working as you 1.

are accustomed to, 2. want it to be, and that is OK. Jesus is with you. It will come back. It is like going through grief. It means that your feelings are all over the place, you might even feel like you are losing your mind. You probably aren't. Let it be. Feel what you are feeling. I know when I was sick these past weeks, maybe the worst part was me not wanting it to be happening; not wanting to feel what I was feeling (and feeling like). Let it be what it will be. God created you in the image of Divinity itself, you were born to grope about in the darkness, Jesus is with you in that, and you can do it as our ancestors did it through times as bad and worse than these.

I know for myself I am having a heck of a time of it. Right? What a lousy way to start a ministry, what a lousy way to bring a family to a new home, a new community. Oh, I have my moments! God alone knows how dark it sometimes looks from this side of my eyes. And, as hard as it is, as little as I know for sure, as much as I don't want this to be happening, as far from my best as I am, as much of a cranky-pants as I can be, I know in my God-fearing heart that I am going to be ok. We are going to make it. You can do this. I need to keep reminding myself of that. I forget sometimes minute to minute. So I keep saying "It will be as it will be" to myself between Hail Marys and you know what? I am ok. So is Windy, so are the girls. So are you. And so will be all of us, though none of us knows what ok will look like.

Let's end today with an oldie but a goodie from the Belle of Amherst, Emily Dickinson, her poem 419.

We grow accustomed to the Dark —  
When light is put away —  
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp  
To witness her Goodbye —

A Moment — We uncertain step  
For newness of the night —  
Then — fit our Vision to the Dark —  
And meet the Road — erect —

And so of larger — Darknesses —  
Those Evenings of the Brain —

When not a Moon disclose a sign —  
Or Star — come out — within —

The Bravest — grope a little —  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead —  
But as they learn to see —

Either the Darkness alters —  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight —  
And Life steps almost straight.

In Jesus Christ, yes it does. AMEN.