

A couple of months ago, my sister and I had an experience that we have never had before, which is saying something in a long line of things we have done together. We had taken an intensive weeklong class through our seminary, which also happened to be taken by one of my colleagues here in Virginia. At the end of the week, he told me of a conversation that was had by those who were in person for the class and how it baffled him. Several of our classmates indicated that it was amusing for them to watch Jennifer and I go back and forth, how some of our mannerisms were the same, and how we played off of each other. At one point, one of the group said, “Wait, what are you talking about?” She had missed the point earlier in the week where we had indicated that we were related, and so everyone was like, Jenn and Tina, they’re sisters. Her response was literally unprecedented in our lives.

“They aren’t sisters! They look nothing alike! They sound nothing alike! Jennifer sounds like she’s from Pennsylvania and Tina is clearly from the south.” So first and foremost, *both* of our Midwestern sensibilities and accents were deeply offended to not have been identified for our long o’s, but also, no one in the history of our interactions together have ever said that we don’t look alike. In fact, for the majority of my life, when Jennifer and I are together, people make the, much to her chagrin, assumption that she’s my mom! Our hair color is almost identical, Jenn’s maybe a smidge darker.

We both have our dad's eyes. We both wear glasses. And beyond a shadow of a doubt we both talk exactly alike, hands flailing and having a tendency to go on and on once we get started. It was shocking to me that this girl couldn't see it. Especially being the baby of the family and looking up to Jenn like I do, it's always been a bit of a point of pride that you can tell that I, in some way, belong to Jennifer. I am obviously not her, but I am of her, and I try my best to emulate and live into that as best I can, so if people can't tell that right off the bat, it kind of irks me a little bit because it feels like I'm not living into what I would like as much as I can.

This is a little bit of the message that Paul is trying to get across to the crowds that have gathered around to hear him preach in Athens. Paul wants them to see their relationship to God in a new light, in a way they haven't thought about before. He wants them to see that how they've thought about their connection to God needs to be rethought and re-examined, particularly in light of how it relates to their relationship with the rest of the world. Paul is nothing if not daring when it comes to wading into situations where all the odds seem to be stacked against him, but God bless him if he isn't going to try and get the hardest message across to the potentially least willing audience, and amazingly...most of the time he succeeded.

So, let's see what's going on here. Paul has spent a great deal of time in and around Athens, to the point that he has seen and thus learned how life amongst Greek Gentiles operates. He has walked the city streets and borne witness to the numerous temples and altars that are placed throughout the city and one of them has caught his eye in particular. During his wanderings, Paul found an altar that was labeled, "To an unknown God." This might seem a little weird to us but think about the pantheon of Greek gods that we have learned about. The Athenians are *so* dedicated to the cult of the gods that they don't want to miss any of them. They are humble enough to admit that there are some they might have missed and for fear of offending a god they skipped over, they make a kind of catch-all altar. For all the gods we may have missed, here is where we acknowledge you.

Paul sees this and he sees an in. *This* is how he reaches this part of God's kingdom. They've been worshipping God the whole time; they just haven't had the name for God or known what exactly they were doing! He could explain that! So, he goes to great lengths to make known this unknown god. The god of this altar is the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and Paul wants to tell them that gospel so that they realize that this is the only altar in their whole city that matters. And yet...Paul actually takes his argument a bit further and

kind of says that at the end of the day, none of the altars matter...including the one that they, unbeknownst to them, built to the God of Paul's gospel.

Paul tells the Athenians that the God is there to proclaim is not a god who lives in shrines or altars made by human hands. Paul's God literally made *everything*, and so it's not like God needs a house, a place to hang God's hat, God made everything and thus is in everything. Some fancy altar in the middle of their city doesn't mean that that's where God lives, God lives everywhere. He takes this a step further and probably continues to boggle the Athenians minds when he says that in fact, God doesn't *need* anything from human hands. God doesn't need sacrifices and altars and all of these things which humans have declared are essential to the rites of good and proper worship. God gives everything life and breath, and so it's a smidge egotistical of us to think that God needs anything from us, God's actual own creation. Because of this, Paul tells them that they are God's offspring, God's children, we belong to and are of God, which means that God isn't in silver or gold or stone or human made images, God is in *us*. God is of spirit and breath and water and the very nature of our cells. God simply *is*. And all of the efforts that they make to create an image, a likeness, a place to say this is where God is and what God looks like is fruitless because honestly, the best example of where God is...is us.

Now, the easy route for us here would be to say that this was simply Paul's message for a specific group of people at a specific place and time. This was a gospel meant for Athens, for people who had gotten themselves twisted up like a pretzel when it came to how, where, and even who they are worshipping, and yet...we aren't here to take the easy route. We much bring to bear the reality that what Paul is saying to the Athenians could just as easily be said to us. Not the part about worshipping an unknown God, I hope we all are at least in some modicum of agreement that the God we're worshipping is the God of creation, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit. But everything he says about God not being in shrines made by human hands, about not being in gold or silver or stone or images made by mortals? That's all right there for us and frankly, I'm not sure we want to hear it.

When we limit God's presence to specific places, specific times, specific modes, it says a lot about where we say God *isn't* or couldn't be. There's nothing wrong with having a beautiful church building, but that's precisely what it is, a building. As every kid who has gone to a Synod event can sing to you, *we* are the church, and by placing God in and amongst gold and silver and immaculate human creations, we say that God is immobile, God is stationary, God is only in one place, rather than saying that in fact, we are the best example of how God lives and moves and has God's being in

the world. It also means that we put a lot of judgment and critique into our siblings. The church that is a storefront, that has fallen on hard times, the church like the one we visited in New Orleans with bullet holes visible in their windows, by emphasizing God in the pomp and the fancy, we tell our siblings, God isn't present and dwelling with you how God is dwelling with us. All of it is to say, just like Paul said to the Athenians, it is not up to us to *limit*, it is in fact up to us to take God out into the world.

Ya know how I said it frustrated me that people couldn't by looking and listening to me that I was Jennifer's sister? It should frustrate us to no end if people can't tell we belong to God by how we act and live in the world. We shouldn't have to tell people where we go to church in order for them to *know* that we are God's offspring, that we are God's beloved, it should be etched into every word we speak, every action we perform, every breath we take in this world. It's fine and great to point to our church building and say, this is where I go to church, but where do you take church with you? Where *are* you church in the world? Do you take church with you to the grocery store? To tunnel/bridge traffic? To your interaction with your co-workers? To your social media posts? To your feelings about hatred and violence and prejudice in the world? Do you model God's love and grace in the world or do you make God fit your image so that we can

fool ourselves into thinking God would shun and despise the people we do so we don't have to try so hard to love our neighbor?

If this building is the only church we are, the only church we do in a given week, a few scant minutes on a Sunday morning, then we are desperately in need of Paul's message this morning. If we think we need pomp worthy of King Charles' coronation to worship God and be God's people, then we are desperately in need of Paul's message this morning. God is present in any and all things, but most especially God is present in *us*. God doesn't *need* our worship; God needs us to *live* our worship. To take the things that we say, pray, and sing here out into the world and actually live them out. To take the grace we receive at this table, the forgiveness we feel at this font, the peace we feel in the clasped hands of one another out to our siblings. Worship is about praising God, yes, but it's also about reminding us who we're supposed to be the other six days and 23 ½ hours of the week. If it all falls mute once we leave this building, it's kind of been a waste of time. What good is grace if we don't take it with us to others? What good is forgiveness if we don't forgive as we have been forgiven? What good is unconditional love if we don't share it with all of God's creation? In God we live and move and have our being, but if someone heard you speaking, would they be able to tell you are God's? **AMEN!!!**