

Live & Move & Have Our Being
Acts 17:16-34
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Today's story from a book called Acts. The gospel writer known as "Luke" wrote his gospel in 2 parts: Part 1 goes by Luke, and it is a story of Jesus; Part 2, called Acts of the Apostles, is a story of the early church. Acts tells the story of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit to the community of Jesus followers. Throughout the book, the Holy Spirit is the main character, pushing those Jesus followers out into the big, bad Mediterranean world. This book is about Christians going out into the world, meeting with other people.

Today's story is about one of those people who was pushed by the Spirit into the world. His name is Paul. Paul is a wild character; there are good Paul stories in here. In chapter 17, Paul is in Athens, one of the great cities of the Mediterranean. Athens is the home of philosophy. Socrates and Plato and Aristotle, the founders of philosophical schools like Cynicism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. What is Paul doing there? Let's read and find out.

⁶ While Paul was waiting for [Timothy and Silas] in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this pretentious babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, God who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since it is God who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor God made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for God and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For 'In God we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we, too, are God's offspring.'

²⁹ "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now God commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged in righteousness by the One whom God has appointed, and of this God has given assurance to all by raising this One from the dead."

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ At that point Paul left them. ³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Paul is in Athens because he has just escaped from jail in Philippi by a miracle. Almost everywhere he goes, he manages to make people angry. Paul should be laying low in Athens, but he can't help himself. He lips always seem to start moving. But unlike so many other places where Paul travelled and he was met by anger, Athens is a different kind of city—it's a city with a DNA for entertaining new ideas. Paul has a *really* new idea about a guy the Romans killed who was actually God in human flesh.

Paul does a darn good job—it almost pains me to say it. He begins by flattering the Athenians, “I see how spiritual you all are...” He connects with them with a bit of “natural theology,” inviting them to feel how the ordered grandeur of the natural world points to God. He says there is a spiritual hunger that is woven into the human condition—we are seemingly made to “fumble about for God.” But even while we are searching for God, Paul says, the truth is that God is already near! Paul concludes by saying that God is not unknown at all—God is deeply personal for each of us; God knows us, God stands at this very moment ready to judge us. God expects our repentance. But we need not be afraid, Paul says; for our righteousness is assured by the One whom God raised from the dead.

Part of me has always been uncomfortable with this story. So many people read it and blithely treat it as proof that “the Gospel” is “right” and every “secular” philosophy, wisdom tradition, or non-Christian religion is “wrong.” Interpreters have tried to draw the connection to the present by saying “those cosmopolitans Athenian are just like us moderns, they were adrift and desperate for meaning in their lives—and they tried to find it in Epicureanism and keto diet and yoga—and all of it was false and hollow until Paul showed up and proclaimed the true gospel.

That reading is not just wrong—it's harmful. It plays into this idea that Christianity is an “idea” that can be conveyed simply through a man's voice. It suggests that Christianity is an argument that can and should be debated in the public square. It's an interpretation that has fed too many Christians to practice the morally-suspect Pauline tradition of apologetics. Christianity is not an idea to be debated. It is not an argument that can be won. It is a way of being. It is a quality of presence. It is the practice—and by “practice” I mean the repeated, disciplined embodiment—of humility, and mercy. It is putting your body and your soul into the act of serving others. The way of Jesus is the lifelong pursuit of the integration of body, mind, and spirit all devoted to love.

The great thing about Acts is that when you read the book, you will find story after story of very personal, intimate encounters between human beings—Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, Peter and Cornelius, even Paul and his jailer in Acts 16. It is these human encounters in which the love that is the energy of our tradition moves from one person to another to another. It's being-with-one-another-in-a-Spirit-of-love that is the power of God. It's not a dude on his soapbox.

As uncomfortable as this text makes me, I want to confess that I also love it. I've always suspected that it's Luke's artistry that I admire—that he finds a way of making even Paul look good. Luke has Paul use the marvelous phrase: “in God we live and move and have our being.”

It's one of my favorite passages in the Scriptures. Those of you who have heard me pray will almost always hear me start my prayer "God, in you we live and move and have our being."

What an extraordinary, revelatory affirmation. It affirms that the very heart of me—the core of me, the substance of who I am—is not exclusively mine. I am "in God." That is, I think, a really powerful and even counter-cultural thing to affirm. In our nation's ontology—in the way our culture "thinks" about the human being, we're told in so many ways that the individual is sovereign. I am the king of myself. I am my own. No one can tell me what to do; no one can make a claim on me. Spirituality, in such a culture, is a project of self-fulfillment.

I'm against fulfillment. But I am suspicious that the elusive fulfillment can ever come from the self.

The healthiest and truest and most honest confession we ever make—is that I am not my own.

Your being, your experience of you—the never-before and never-again mix of self that is made up of your consciousness and your culture and your biology and your spirit—this once-in-a-forever mix of stuff that is You... *that You is not exclusively yours.*

I didn't make me. The way I'm made, the way the pieces fit together—none of this was my idea. The world in which I'm placed—the way everything a human needs—air and water and food and friendship—life wasn't my grand idea. My being is derived. It comes from somewhere else. Our being comes to us from outside of us. Our tradition affirms that our Being comes from God, who is Being itself. And God, the source of all being, is Love.

This idea—that Being itself is relational—is so powerful. It is the beginning of faith. If we are not alone, we will find ourselves, like the Athenians, searching and fumbling after God. But the relational nature of Being is also the beginning of ethics. We come into our being through one another. There is no "self" that is not a "self-in-relationship." Every way we have of making sense of the world—language, culture, ideas, art—all of it is social in nature; it requires us to engage, cooperate with, learn from, be with one another.

I am not my own. That powerful, radical statement is not a negation of you. It is an affirmation that the truth of who I am can only be found in you... and in the One in whom we live and move and have our being.