

VI Easter  
Acts 17: 22-31      1 Peter 3:13-22      John 14: 15-21  
St. Mary the Virgin  
May 21, 2017

Sermon  
The Rev. Dr. Paula D. Nesbitt

...and I will love them, and I will reveal myself to them.” Amen.

For Jesus, this period in the gospel is a time of transition, no longer grounded in the material world, yet present to it while awaiting the moment of union with God. For the disciples, the transition is both tragic and joyful—tragic in the recent memory of the crucifixion and the death of their dreams of ministry with Jesus in the flesh, and yet joyful through the resurrection appearances that reinvigorated their faith in all that Jesus had said was real and true.

Transitions are liminal moments, where we feel betwixt and between. In these times, we are at our most vulnerable point. The disciples undoubtedly felt anxious about the future: could they take the Jesus movement forward without Jesus physically present to guide them? Very few new religious movements (perhaps only about ten percent) survive beyond the death or departure of the founder, according to research.<sup>1</sup> How would they discern what is the Holy Spirit guiding them? How do we during our own times of transition?

There is a tendency for people to seek out, or to have, a religious or spiritual experience during or recently after major transitions in their lives. For some, this can be a time to return to church or their religious tradition. For others, they may seek out new spiritual directions. Occasionally these can lead own false pathways. A former student of mine, who for many years was in what she called a religious cult, said that it would look for people going through three or more life transitions. When we are vulnerable during such times of transition, how do we discern what is authentically of the Holy Spirit?

Put another way, what kind of spirituality will endure, and sustain us during whatever the future may hold? This question underlies Paul’s sermon to the Athenians, in a culture well-known for loving philosophical ideas on spiritual matters. It also was a place famous for its hospitality to religious cults.<sup>2</sup> Paul in his sermon makes note of an altar inscribed “to an unknown god” (Acts:17:23). Such artifacts from religious practices of bygone eras, about which

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<sup>1</sup> Sociological research on new religious movements. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 2. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, pp. 1121-25; Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> G.H.C. Macgregor, “Acts,” Exegesis. In *Interpreter’s Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., vol. IX. New York: Abingdon Press, 1954, p. 231.

little is known, are what sociologist Emile Durkheim calls “religious debris.”<sup>3</sup> There were many such shrines in Athens at the time of Paul’s visit. The religious significance dates to several centuries earlier, when a deadly epidemic had spread across the area. A flock of sheep had been let loose and wherever they lay down, they were sacrificed at the altar of the nearest god. If the nearby altar had been to a god who was unknown to the Athenians, the sheep was sacrificed to “The Unknown God,”<sup>4</sup> in spiritual hope that whatever god it might be could bring the epidemic to an end.

Paul makes explicit that having faith in the one living and eternal God covers all of the hopes placed in a pantheon of diverse gods, including homage to publicly unknown gods that served as a sort of miscellaneous category of divinity. Paul’s argument would have made sense to those of the intellectual elite of Athens who had not abandoned religion altogether, but there is a difference between embracing an idea and being willing to act on it in faith.

The situation in Athens reminds me of our own era, particularly in the rise of religious “nones,” a large sector who call themselves spiritual but not religious. Although some live out their spiritual beliefs through a focused spiritual practice, even though they don’t formally identify with a religious community or specific denomination, spirituality for others is more like the Athenian relationships to the unknown gods-- part of the spiritual landscape for a need should it arise, especially when existing gods or patterns of behavior fail to fulfill the need.

By other gods, I’m thinking of American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr’s comment that often in living out our lives, we tend to be polytheists, as he said, “referring now to this and now to that valued being as the source of life’s meaning. Sometimes [we] live for Jesus’ God, sometimes for country and sometimes for Yale.” Niebuhr was a professor at Yale. “For the most part [we] make gods out of [ourselves] or out of the work of [our] own hands, living for [our] own glory as persons and as communities.”<sup>5</sup> The question he asks us is, where is your center of value? Will this focus see you through your own difficult transitions? Like Paul, Niebuhr argues that the one living, eternal God suffices for all, if we only focus and live out of the core of our belief. This, like a spiritual compass, will help guide us in discerning where the Holy Spirit might be leading us.

Our culture, as our planet, is in a dramatic time of transition. More than ever we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In response to the question posed in our parish’s Faith in Action discernment groups held over the past two weeks, “What keeps you awake at night,” for me it is the concern that we as a culture are living off our spiritual capital, drawing down the endowment of centuries of religious wisdom and experience. Will there come a day when our faith communities are part of a bygone era? What if anything will replace them for future generations?

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<sup>3</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Free Press, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Barclay, William. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Revised edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976, pp.131-32.

<sup>5</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*. New York: Macmillan, 1941, p.57. In the original quotation, without bracketed words, Niebuhr used the third-person (men, they, their) to refer to people in general.

Paul's sermon also emphasized that we are created to seek and discover God,<sup>6</sup> and that God is not limited to a shrine—or church building. Perhaps one of the ways in which we may have contributed to religious decline is when we have come to worship the building, or the congregation, more than God. Where, in our faith, is our center of value?

Some years ago a parish had become surrounded by high-rise office buildings, with little left of the residential neighborhood that it once had served. It had a large endowment from a bygone era, but only a handful of parishioners. The Sunday I had visited, there were about 15; most had been members for more than 50 years. They felt little hope for the future of their church. The rector, feeling despondent as well, began having conversations with people outside the parish to discern what the spiritual and physical needs might be of people working in the surrounding offices and elsewhere in the neighborhood. The few parishioners also visited other congregations that had taken innovative steps with their surrounding communities, and they began to pray and discern where the Holy Spirit might lead them. When I visited a few years later, they had decided to sell their building and buy another, a short distance away, where they could convert an old printer's warehouse into a different kind of church.

Today, the parish has a lively, spiritually vital ministry: the first floor serving as a community hall and meeting space, and the second floor as the church sanctuary, which shares space at different times of the day and week with a Lutheran congregation, and at times has included other faith traditions. The congregations also have worked together to create a spiritual center for the neighborhood. The nontraditional setting has drawn many unfamiliar with church or inclusive congregational communities. That small handful of parishioners who were willing to let the Holy Spirit guide them, took great risks in moving beyond their traditional understanding of church community, but their legacy will extend the message of Christ well into the future.

The first letter of Peter warns that following Christ, through the Holy Spirit, will be difficult. Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us, but we must seek guidance. For my former student who had been in a religious cult, she realized that the spiritual way she had followed was a dead end, but she stayed in anyway, partly out of embarrassment, and later, out of not knowing how to get out. The Holy Spirit, however, does not give up on us. Once she became committed to finding a way out, she encountered a few people she felt that she could trust to help her. It involved physical danger, which she was willing to risk. She not only made her way out, but she became a Protestant minister, seeking to guide others in the way of the Holy Spirit.

I pray that all of us may use the experience of our own difficult transitions, and where we have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, to guide others in the future.

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<sup>6</sup> Carl R. Holladay, "Acts," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, ed. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988, p.1103.