

Sermon for May 17th, 2020
 6th Sunday of Easter (Year A)
 Sermon Text: Acts 17: 22-31 and 1Peter 3: 13-22
 Sermon Title: “*Let’s Tour the House!*”

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, hear our prayers this morning. We want to be near you because you are the one, “in whom we live and breathe and have our being.” Even in our suffering and uncertainty, you are present and hear our prayers. You are also present in the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth when the air is filled with human lies. No matter where we are on our faith journey you accompany us. Lord, hear our prayers. Amen.

LET US PRAY: Come, Holy Spirit. Come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Wind and cleanse us from within; come as Holy Light, and lead us in the darkness; come as Holy Truth, and dispel our ignorance, come as Holy Life, and dwell in us. Amen.

When Dave and I got married, we were well into middle age and had established likes and dislikes. This was nowhere more apparent than in our decorating tastes. I liked Victorian clutter: large overstuffed chairs, lots of pillows, books piled everywhere, heavy draperies on the windows, and low lighting. Dave, on the other hand, liked open airy spaces with a few pieces of furniture, and definitely no pillows. When I moved into his house, he was much more gracious than I would have been, had the roles been reversed. He would quip that our living room looked like a furniture store: you could see a chair on the other side of the room where you would like to sit, but you had no idea how you were going to get to it. Dave often uses humor to point out my flaws, which is a good thing because I have lots of them. It’s very true that when you walk into someone’s house you can see what they value. Art on the walls, lots of books, pets, pictures of family, televisions, lots of pillows – all these are clues to where their hearts rest.

The same can be said for the things we fear. Locked doors, medicine cabinets full of vitamins, aspirin, and cold remedies, reveal our fears. Some of these fears are prudent precaution; others are just silliness. Do I really think that *Oil of Olay* is going to prevent wrinkles? Sometimes, though, what is in our house represents a fear that is deeply rooted in our psychology. When I was teaching English, I remember going to a faculty member’s house and being amazed by the quantity of food that she had

stored in her cabinets, refrigerator, and pantry. Later, her story revealed that she had been raised by an unstable, single parent, and had, at one time, been homeless.

When Paul walks through Athens, he can also see both what the people of that city love and fear. They are sophisticated and clearly religious, which Paul notes by all the objects of worship in the city. But they have a lot of fears as well, represented clearly by the altar with the inscription "*To an unknown god.*" This altar is erected to an unknown god, just in case there's a powerful god out there that they don't know about, but a god that can cause tremendous destruction should he or she feel slighted by the city. Paul uses both the Athenians' fear and their capacity for devotion when he addresses them from the Areopagus (air ee op uh guhs), which was a low hill in Athens northwest of the acropolis. The hill had stone seats for the council that met there, the origins of which went back to the advisory council of Athenian kings.

Paul's speech begins with recognition of the Athenians' deep roots in religion, then moves to a rather sympathetic critique of their idolatry and concludes with a call for repentance. The arc of his address is to persuade the Athenians that they are missing out on so much because their fears have diverted their attention to lesser gods. The realm of the one true God is all around us, Paul argues, and we are going to miss out if we are not paying attention.

Here's the interesting point about our relationship with God, who does not require shrines made by human hands, or who can be captured in gold or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. In the lectionary reading from 1 Peter, the author writes: "*Do not fear what they fear.*" Do not fear gods of stone and metal. Do not fear unknown gods. Do not fear humans who set themselves up as gods. Do not even fear death. Our God is the One in whom "*we live and move and have our being.*" We are always *in God*. This scripture calls us to recognize the mysterious interrelationship that undergirds our being; it challenges us to live lives of love, courage, and hope.

Notice that Paul does not condemn what the people have believed; in fact, he says that God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, but now commands all people everywhere to repent. To repent is to change

direction, to turn around, in this case to live lives without fear, trusting in the one true God.

Isn't that what the Athenians were looking for? To live abundantly, without fear? Isn't that what we're looking for? To live abundantly, without fear? For this kind of life, we need fear nothing but God. This fear of God is not the same as having fear borne of prudence or lived experience, like losing people we love or fearing the violence of people around us. This fear of God is more like awe. To live with awe is to be invited out of our lesser fears, just as it is an invitation to leave those lesser gods behind. To live in awe of God is to recognize that God is as close to us as our next breath. To live in awe of God is to stay awake to all those holy moments in our lives that we are invited into, because the God in whom we live and move and have our being is there.

A benediction from the *New Century Hymnal* goes like this: "*May you love God so much that you love nothing else too much. May you fear God enough that you need fear nothing else at all.*" To live without fear, to live abundantly is to fear God enough that we need fear nothing else at all.

This God is the source of all hope. The writer of 1 Peter says: *Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.*" Don't we all want to be known as people of confidence, of hope? I do. IF you come to my house, you will see that I could probably get rid of a lot of clutter; if you look in my medicine cabinet, you will see that I am prepared for the next cold season, and fear the onset of more wrinkles. But these are silly fears, and I try to treat them with humor. And you may do the same. The one thing that I really fear is living my life without God. That's the only fear any of us should have that is really worth caring about. Amen.