

Easter 6A

Acts 17:22 – 31

John 14:15 – 21

Hedging your god bets

One of the jobs that intrigues me is being a real estate agent. People's homes fascinate me. As well as the houses themselves. When I travel I often pick up those real estate flyers in grocery stores to see what's typical. Last week I picked one up in Duluth, Minnesota, on my way north, exploring the north shore of Lake Superior. I would have loved to know more about the historic homes in Duluth by the lake, and the striking contemporary ones perched on the steep hillsides looking over Lake Superior. And beyond architectural curiosity, and market price trends, what's even more compelling to me is visiting someone's home. Inviting guests into our homes is a biblical, sacred act of hospitality. It's always an honor for me, no matter how fancy or how simple, to be welcomed into someone's home and glimpse into their lives. Are there walls of books? Lots of family pictures? Beloved family antiques? Treasures from travels? What kind of art? A hobby – figurines collected, quilts sewn? A good friend of mine in St. Louis has an entire bedroom devoted to the Formula 1 car models he and his father have put together over the years. You learn lots about a person and a family from their home.

Boston UCC pastor Quinn Caldwell wrote in his column on today's passage from Acts, that not only do we learn what people love from their homes, we can sometimes what they're afraid of. Is there more than one deadbolt lock on the door? Lots of outdoor lighting? Fire extinguishers in every room? Epi pen in the kitchen?

Rev. Caldwell wonders if Paul wasn't thinking along these lines as he toured Athens, with its variety of religious shrines and temples, each one celebrating a particular god's benefits. And in that touring he came across an altar to an unknown god. Paul wisely concludes that if the Greeks felt they needed to cover their bases by making an altar to an unknown god, even with all those other gods, they weren't totally sure they were safe in the god department. That altar to an unknown god told him that they were still afraid. That they didn't have the peace he and other Jews and Christians had with God, and with the risen Christ. He offers a lovely statement of faith, in essence inviting them to take down the altar to the unknown god, and all the temples to the known gods, too. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live

in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ..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."

And if we had included today's epistle reading from 1 Peter, we would have heard more about fear; "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be shamed." In the gospel reading, Jesus is anticipating the fears of the disciples, fears of abandonment and lack of direction, after his death. "Keep my commandments, listen to the Spirit, I will not leave you orphaned."

If houses tell us a lot about their inhabitants, what do you think this church tells people about you, the church family that lives here? And more importantly, about the God and Christ you follow? It's so important, in this interim time and all the time, to spend a little time putting ourselves in the shoes of those who are here for the first or second or third time. Rev. Peter Marty says that from his experience, and I'd agree, that guests are often coming from less than satisfying church experiences. Except for having moved to a different place, why else would someone be looking for a new church? Does Bethlehem tell people that they are very welcome here? That we are a joyful, not fearful house of God? That we're not embroiled in conflict? That we don't spend lots of energy arguing over the color of the carpet? That we do actively care about Evansville, east and west, north and south, and the rest of the world? And that we do have respect for other churches. That the pastors are ethical and caring? That we are willing to be changed if they as a guest, come back and add their gifts and their questions to ours, working side by side with us?

Rev. Rob Bell of Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan is an Evangelical pastor whose latest book, Love Wins, has caused quite a stir across the church world. He's changed his theology and says he now believes that with our God, love wins, not hate, not hell. He doesn't think a church can with integrity decorate with fear and hate, that only love is in God's color palette. He talks about the theological inconsistency of God loving us one minute, and then traumatizing us the next. I haven't read the book, so I won't venture further, but his point is well taken. What do our words and actions tell us and our guests about God? Do they celebrate life and love and service, or do they motivate with fear and judgment, or insist that ours is the only right way?

One Sunday morning, as the opening hymn was being sung, a university student came into the sanctuary. He had the long hair of the day, and the less the new and well kept clothes of a student away from home. The church was full, and when the young man saw no seat, he simply sat down in the aisle. Now in some churches an usher might have asked him to get up and move. And probably some in that church were uncomfortable with his appearance and actions. But thanks be to God, one of the elders, a man with white hair and a three-piece suit slowly made his way down the aisle and with great difficulty got down on the floor with the young man. They worshipped there together. That so impressed the student that it was the beginning of a relationship with that church that changed his life. Is the interior decorating of Bethlehem Church of that same style? Is yours? Would we similarly welcome that young man? Do we love Jesus enough, and remember his radical welcome of all outsiders; to maybe not totally get over our feelings that someone doesn't fit in here, but at least have the spiritual sense to know they are a child of God who has come to worship?

This Sabbath day let's examine our hearts, our homes, our church for altars to unknown gods. Let's look for fears that keep us from living life to its fullest, and for hedged bets, just in case we've chosen the wrong god, or skipped the right one. What do we fear more than we trust God? Do we trust that we are fiercely loved by the one who created us, claimed each of us in our baptism like we celebrated for Avery today? Do we hedge our bets with practices and ways of thinking that worship security or our way of life above all others? May today's Good News; Paul's words to the Athenians, and Jesus' words to the early disciples speak to each of us. Jesus will not leave us orphaned, and "...in God we live and move and have our being." In those truths, may we live our lives with joy, trust, keeping God's commandments, freed to serve all our sisters and brothers in need.