

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Seeking the One Together*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Rev. Katrina Shawgo  
July 10, 2011

Scripture Reading: Acts 27:22-28 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I want to share with all of you who have patiently endured my presence here at the church for many months, a bit of my story. For most of my life, I think I must have been much like the Greeks whom Paul was addressing in the scripture. Religious, I suppose, if by religious we mean that I went to our mid-size, theologically moderate Presbyterian Church in Amarillo, TX every Sunday. I went to Sunday School, Vacation Bible school, and Youth Group. I asked questions that perplexed and probably annoyed my Sunday School teachers.

So I was faithful...and curious. I knew I was different from my friends. Most of them came from evangelical traditions; many were concerned with saving my soul. None of them understood my infant baptism, or confirmation, and it must have been about middle school that I first came out with the most heinous of proposals for a Christian from the Texas Panhandle. Prepare yourselves. I decided I believed Jews did in fact go to heaven. Shock and awe.

While looking back, it seems so minor a statement given my current theological framework that has gone on to make many statements far less palatable to my evangelical sisters and brothers in the faith, I remember it specifically as my first step out. My theological coming out, I suppose.

Questions of theology had always intrigued me. Even as young girl, I earned the nickname "the little theologian" among my church. I began attending presbytery meetings with my actively involved mother in the fourth grade. I've always loved being Presbyterian. A sick and twisted mind like my own enjoys the voting, and questioning, and debating. My church was supportive, truly they were. And when I one day was struck with the crazy, wild, harebrained idea that I should go to seminary, they supported me without question.

And so I thought, when I entered into the process to become an ordained minister, that the committee which oversaw me, a committee made up of ministers and lay persons that I knew and admired, would mentor me on my search for both my calling and my God. I was wrong.

These committees tend more toward hazing rituals. The slightest inkling of progressive thought was quickly squelched. I was even instructed to go back and read my Bible from beginning to end. While doing my internship under a wise and wonderful minister in Elgin, Texas, by the name of Nan Jenkins, my committee instructed me to call together a group of men only at the church to talk to me about the way my preaching, teaching, and leadership sat with them as men. I might be making them uncomfortable. To the credit of the men of First Presbyterian Church in Elgin, they scoffed at the request, and then refused.

After 5 years of power struggles, control issues, and hurt feelings, my committee, either affirming my gifts or just wanting to get rid of me, did finally approve me to seek ordination. Then came a chaplain residency, and after that a call to Hospice Austin, and here I am. Though it may not seem like it, that is actually the short version.

Looking back now, I see the struggles of that time with fresh perspective. I see things now I didn't know then. The problems with the dynamics of the committee at that time were obvious. At the time, I didn't know how to function well when faced with group anxiety. But the root of my struggle, and perhaps this was the spark that caused the fire, was that I had a vision of God that didn't fit theirs. I knew it and I feared it.

Paul talks about seeking, reaching out for, and possibly even finding the One who is never really far from us. In seminary, that's just what I started to do. But I was seeking and reaching for the God I was supposed to believe in...the notion of God that would be acceptable among my colleagues in the ministry. This was a God with rules...a God with expectations from me and from the church...a God that lived within a very important theological framework of which I was not to stray.

Funny...I never found that God. I only continued to be faced with a growing sense that God could not be confined to human sanctuaries or to theological frameworks. I found a God more concerned with justice than with rules. I found a God who demanded only that we love one another. I found a God who insisted on the inclusion of all people...a God who is never really far from us...a God in whom we live and move and have our being. Oops.

Coming to St. Andrew's gave me the courage I needed to finally be honest about who I was and what I believed about God. I finally let myself live into what I believed to be true about my experience of God. As the scripture reading said, "What I was worshipping in ignorance (or perhaps, for me, fear) was being made known to me." And Paul sums up what I discovered about God in this passage.

Paul's speech is striking for the context. It takes place in the Areopagus in Athens, a place where criminal cases were often heard and argued. The view from the Areopagus is striking still today. You can see all of Athens. So Paul is standing in the middle of a public court, in a city high in intellectualism—Stoic and Epicurean philosophers and followers - telling them about the God that lives not only in the sentimental regions of our psyche, but lives also in their rationality, logic, and science. God is in it all.

And then Paul does something to, I think, bring home the point that the knowledge of this God is not restricted to any certain kind of follower. He quotes from one of their own poets, Aratus. What Paul quotes is actually from the opening of a poem about weather patterns and constellations. But the language of that poem is strikingly similar to what Paul is saying about God. The poem is addressed to Zeus, (who by that time the Stoics considered another name for life force). The poem describes that Zeus, this life force, is everywhere...in the streets, seas, and markets.

It says that God has set into motion the nature of the universe and that if we look around, signs of that life force are everywhere. Like the poet Aratus, Paul is moving from an anthropomorphic God, a God that must be represented by some visual aid or name, to an abstract, but wholly real force that pervades the entire world.

So Paul chooses this quote, "We too are God's children." In the poem by Aratus and in the speech from Paul, I believe this is a call to remember who we are and what we are a part of. We are each part of the life force of this world. We are each equally called to enjoy this creation and to be good stewards of it. And,

we are each equally loved by the God who is in us...creating in us.

And that's why I thought this scripture was perfect for this Sunday. For those who don't know, today is the official day that the amendment to the Presbyterian Church constitution goes into effect...the amendment which allows our GLBT sisters and brothers full inclusion into the church, including the role of ordained ministry. A small victory for justice in a long-fought battle, with much more work to be done going forward.

But it is still call for celebration. It is a day that our sisters and brothers long silenced in this denomination can ring their own voices with the refrain they have been singing all along...like Paul says, "We too are God's children." We too are a beautiful and valued part of the life force of this world. We too are a part of the ministry of love in the church. We too are seeking, reaching out for, and maybe even finding the One in whom we all live and move and have our being.

And I believe this is the dream...the gospel...the heart of it all. That together, not divided, not excluding, but together we go on this search, this search for meaning, this search for truth. Together we stand for justice. Together we live out our calling to be the voice for the voiceless. That we recognize that God is in all of us. That God is the life force. And with this knowledge, to deny the spirit in anyone is to deny it in ourselves.

And so the message to the Presbyterian Church and all churches and states and nations, the message from any who have been marginalized, silenced, or rebuked for believing in the God whose radical love and life includes us all, our message is "We too are God's children."

And we will never stop saying it. We will never stop insisting that those voices be heard. We will not let anyone be denied or excluded from ministries of grace, love, and compassion. We will never stop advocating for love over fear. We too are God's children. And that cannot be denied.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

**St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church** welcomes and affirms all people without regard to race, nationality, age, gender, gender identity, marital status, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, economic or educational class.

We are affiliated with the PC (USA). ([www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org))

We are a More Light congregation. ([www.mlp.org](http://www.mlp.org))

We are an affiliate of The Center for Progressive Christianity. ([www.tepc.org](http://www.tepc.org))

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
  - believers and agnostics,
  - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
  - women and men,
  - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
  - those of all races and cultures,
  - those of all classes and abilities,
  - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
  - striving for peace and justice among all people,
  - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
  - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

*(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)*



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