

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, MAY 17, 2020

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Crying in the Chapel"

Based on Acts 17:22-31

You saw me crying in the chapel, the tears I shed were tears of joy...

When I first heard these words crooned out one Sunday morning years ago during worship, they were done so mournfully, it took me a while to realize that the song was actually, quite joyful and happy:

*I know the meaning of contentment
I am happy with the Lord.*

The Apostle Paul was not happy. You got to love Paul: no world class diplomat here. You can hear the sarcasm dripping off his words as wandered up and down the aisle of the growing church:

I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. (v22-23)

In case you missed it, Paul had come for a visit to his church in Athens, and he was not impressed with what he saw. Lots of fussing about the size

of the communion table, who ironed the linen cloth on the top, and who donated this or that gold ornament, and where it was placed on the table. Not too much going on about prayer or praise to Christ, however, which is really what got Paul annoyed.

Now you have to give the good people of Athens a wee bit of a break. If you recall, Paul was a master of moving into towns and cities, previously well beyond the scope of the work of the disciples. These were 'pagans', 'foreigners', 'gentiles', people generally avoided in the early days of Christianity, because they were different. Their customs and language were not well understood; their homes well beyond the Holy Land, in the vast area of the Mediterranean Sea. But it was exactly the kind of place Paul reveled in. Because he had spent most of his adult life in these kinds of cities, and was not taken aback by the sights and smells of someplace different.

The believers that Paul spoke to did not come always come from a Jewish background, or a Christian one for that matter. They came from a dying world of pagan

worship: of idols and rituals and festivals that seem archaic and simplistic in our modern world. They, like Paul on the Road to Damascus, had come to know Christ later in life. But it was hard to move their thinking from the old ways to the new way Paul preached about. They were familiar with idols, and rituals, and it made them feel like they were doing things right to worship their new 'God' this way.

But of course, they were doing things wrong. What had started out as an attempt to properly respect this new "God" Paul had taught them about had become, over time, a battle of wits about who had the biggest and best communion table in Athens. Slipping back into their previous faith traditions of worshipping idols, the good people of Athens had moved "God" down the scale to "god". Paul was not amused.

But what really upset Paul the most was the few words carved into the table:

"To an unknown God." (v23)

To say that Paul was upset is a little mild. To say that Paul was sardonic (my husband's

favourite word) is getting closer. Paul was furious.

"Let me tell you about this God," Paul began. "He doesn't need these walls. He does not live or breathe as you or I.

- He is the one who made our breath.
- He is the one who designed our bodies.
- He does not wish your gold or silver.
- He wishes you to recognize that since He is your breath and your body and your very soul, you and He are one.
- And He longs for you to reach out to Him and explore this more fully.

It is time to set aside these old ways, and stop arguing about tables and statues. It is time to embrace fully, the God who lives and breathes within you."

The battle over worship styles, and church building designs, and communion tables has travelled with us through history, I am sorry to say. And the tendency to slip from admiring something created out of love to God, into a display of show and opulence has been a battle through the centuries. The split of the church in the Reformation Period gained a foothold in many minds, because the display of art and statues and tapestries, created by artists to express their faith, became, in time, a display of showing off by the

church, at just how grand and glorious they were. Which of course, was not at all grand or glorious in God's eyes.

Down through the centuries, we believers have sometimes fought over the most ridiculous things: whether candles should be lit or not during worship; whether the blinds should be left open or closed after church; whether anything can be put on the communion table or not; where the pulpit should be placed in the Sanctuary; and so on and so on. All the while, our Christ is crying out from the corner of our chapel, "What about Me?"

We 'offspring', we believers, we chosen ones: we still have the tendency to get off track, and worry more about what 'things' look like, that what 'we' look like, in Christ's eyes. We forget that Christ is in the room, and Christ is supposed to be the reason why we are in the room.

These last few months have forced us to re-think what church is, and what church means to us. We've all had some growing pains, and had to compromise on what 'church really is' for us, not because the Minister changed something, or because the budget didn't allow it, or because 'Bossy Bessie always gets her way': but because a health scare has forced us to stay home and stay safe.

- Our church has changed.
- Our Sunday morning routine has changed.
- Our level of comfort has changed.
- But has Christ changed?
- Has our worship of Him changed?
- Is He the same Christ today as he was before the virus?

We are thankful to have this building, and our communion table, and our spacious sanctuary. But this virus is teaching us an important lesson about what is valuable at worship:

The people.
The community gathered.
The prayers.
The music.
The Word.

It appears, that soon, we will be gathering again as family in our pews. And when a safe time comes that we can be together, I pray that we will not lose sight of what we have learned during this time that we have been apart.

What have you missed the most: the communion table or the church community? When you return to the chapel, will you be crying tears of joy?

Now I'm happy in the chapel, where people are of one accord. Yes, we gather in the chapel, just to sing and praise the Lord

~Artie Glenn