

God Is Not Far Off

Curtis Preston
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow, UCC
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Last week I was out in the memorial garden, finishing a conversation with two of Norris Dibble's adult children, when a young man came from around the front of the church. "Is there a pastor here?" he asked. Mike and I have both gotten used to being asked for help from people who come into church looking for a tank of gas, or a Big Y gift card. I listen patiently to their story, whatever their story is that day, and make my best guess as to what extent they are telling the truth. While it is always clear that they are a person in need, what exactly the actually need (and how that matches with what they want) is a difficult decision. These encounters are usually had on the bench outside the main office with several generations of previous pastors looking on. I take some comfort in knowing that I'm not the first pastor to be confronted with these decisions. What would Mike have done? What about Gary? What about Clarke or Gene, or our old friend Stephen Williams. Did he have people knocking on his office door looking for help? Occasionally I'm left feeling good that perhaps I've helped stranger, but mostly leaves me with a pit of my stomach feeling that I've been duped or used or both. And yet, I continue to err on the side of generosity. Selfishly, it helps me sleep better and is, and not incidentally it happens to be what I believe Jesus would do. So when a young man, maybe early twenties, dressed in a white shirt, black pants, dark tie, came around the side of the church "after hours" looking for an unknown and unnamed pastor I had a feeling I was in for a story. He told me he'd wait for me on the steps until I was done talking with the family.

"Hi I'm Curt, I'm one of the pastors here." "Hi Pastor Curt, I'm Derek." "What can I do for you Derek?" "Pastor I'm in need of some prayer." I've been asked for a lot of things, but prayer is rarely one of them, so obviously I'm intrigued. "I'm up here from Georgia and . . ." he launched into a long story about how he was selling magazines, and about how he used to be in trouble with the law but that he'd found Christ and

had turned his life around but how he was up here in Massachusetts far from family and without support and he didn't know what to do? Should I go home? Should I stay here and work? I don't know what God wants me to do with my life?" We talked a while longer, maybe ten minutes or so and I asked him when the last time he went to church was. "It's been a while," he admitted. "If it were me, I'd go to church this Sunday and listen for a word." Then I took his hands in mine, and we had a prayer. When he lifted his head he was crying, and when I saw he was crying, I started crying.

The lessons for this Sunday both speak to the ways and the places we find God in our lives. In the passage from Acts, we hear Paul declare to the Athenians that God is not in the idols or the objects of worship—"since we are God's offspring, we ought not think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals." In John 14 we hear the conclusion of a conversation Jesus is having with Phillip at the table of the last supper. Just before today's lesson, Phillip says, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus response is "Whoever has seen me has seen the father." Jesus then goes on in today's reading saying, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you."

There is a lot to unpack here, beginning with, "I will not leave you orphaned." I will not leave you alone. I will not leave you without a provider, without a guide, on you own. As you may know, orphans in Jesus day were particularly vulnerable because all of the societal institutions were tied to the family. One without family had no stability, no social network, no support or protection. Jesus promises that his disciples will not be out on their own, left to fend for themselves.

"In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will also live." This is a perfect passage for the season of Easter, the season of resurrection and new life. Though Jesus is no longer "seen" that is that he no longer appears to us as he was, he is still seen. Not only do we see the living Christ, but we have life because Christ lives. I can promise you that when I saw Derek come around the front of the church, I had no expectation, no particular hope of being moved by our encounter. And yet, I was not only

moved by our encounter, I was changed by it. Where I expected to find sorrow, I found joy. Where I expected to find doubt, I found faith. Where I expected to find frustration and disappointment, I found hope and for me, that is just about as close as I get to seeing the living Christ face to face.

Paul says in Acts 17, “indeed, God is not far from each one of us.” So if it is the case that God is not far off, then why is it that so many of us have such a hard time finding God? Is it the case that we are looking for God in all the wrong places, or is it more that we, like Mary on that first Easter morning, see but fail to recognize God? If asked where we most often find God, how many of us would think first of a walk in the woods, or a time of quiet prayer, or perhaps a few choice passages of scripture? Would any of us dare to say to a friend, or a stranger for that matter, if you are looking for God, church is pretty good place to start?

Martin Copenhaver describes it well in recent article in *Congregations* magazine:

“A few months ago I spent several days hiking in the interior reaches of the Grand Canyon. To me it is a holy place, the most vaulted of natural Gothic cathedrals. It is not hard to feel close to God there, not only because of what is present, but also due to what is largely absent—the demands of living in community. The buttes don’t quarrel with each other. The California condors make no demands of the living. The rollicking streams offer only comforting words. There is no need to raise money for a sanctuary roof because the blue sky has already supplied it. To me, the affirmation that God can be found outside the church has never seemed like much of a claim. The true wonder is that God can be found inside the church, among quirky, flawed, and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another. What an unlikely setting in which to encounter God! But the Christian God seems to like to surprise us by showing up in the most unpromising places, like a Jew from Nazareth and in a motley gathering of people known as church. God throws us together in the church and says, in essence, “Here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with other people, to forgive, and even come to see God in one another. After all, if you can find God here, you can find God anywhere.”¹

¹ Copenhaver, Martin “Staying in Church” *Congregations Magazine: Winter 2007* Alban Institute

I have always understood, even when I didn't have the vocabulary or theological background I do now, I've always understood God in terms of relationship. That "I in the father, you in me, I in you" piece Jesus describes. For me, what makes the concept of the trinity so powerful is that God is relational-- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three separate, yet equal parts of a functional triad. They are interrelated interdependent aspects of the same divine essence. God is relationship and it is in relationships that I have personally always found God. I discovered God, I came to know God, while at church camp and at youth group retreats—at gatherings of other looking, searching, groping and confused folks hoping to find something that made sense in a world that didn't make much sense.

Here at our church we have countless opportunities for discovering that God is not far off. I hear people talk about Friday Evening Fellowship, or the Second Saturdays Parents Night Out Co-op, or the Men's Discipleship Covenant and Fellowship and I wonder if the people coming understand what is happening is because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Do our youth programs, our various choirs, our women's benevolent gatherings, our Sacred Circles, our prayer shawl group or our ministries in Haiti see that these experiences are meaningful not because of the particular combination of personalities gathered, but because God will not leave us orphaned. Because the risen Christ is in the midst of us.

Indeed God is all around us—in the woods, in the words of the scriptures, in the stranger on the street but also, perhaps remarkably so, in the church. I sent Derek back to church not because one needs a church to find God, but because, like me, that is where Derek found God and where God found Derek. Where do you discover the one "in whom we live and move and have our being?" Where do you discover the one "in whom we live and move and have our being?" Do you worship and unknown and unknowable God, formed in the art and imagination of mortals, or do you know that God has come to you, has been revealed to you, that God abides with you, and that God will not leave you orphaned? The Athenians had idols to an unknown God. Thankfully, our God is not so hard to get to know. Amen.