

The Core of Who We Are

Psalm 97:6-9
Acts 17:22-27

First Presbyterian Church
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I want to read for you a poem by Edward Martin, found in the book titled “Masterpieces of Religious Verse.”

Within my earthly temple, there's a crowd;
There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud,
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,
There's one that, unrepentant, sits and grins;
There's one that loves his neighbor as himself,
And one that cares for naught but fame and self.
From much corroding care I should be free,
If I could once determine which is me.¹

Who are we at the core of our being? This is a primal question asked throughout the ages from the time humans first walked the earth. It's the first question that arises in the heart of every baby born. And, often, it's the last question on the lips of every person who draws a final breath. Who are we at the core of our being?

Today we are going to ask that question alongside the Apostle Paul and the people of ancient Greece – Athens, Greece, to be exact.

Paul arrives in Athens, is taken to the Areopagus – or marketplace where everyone hangs around talking to one another – and he says to all those gathered nearby, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’”

Here we have the first clue about the core of who we are. Human beings are religious, in the broadest sense of the word. When I say we are religious, I mean that we know we are incomplete in-and-of-ourselves. All people deep down inside have a longing for something more, a sense that there's more to who we are, that there's more to us than meets the eye. We are incomplete in-and-of ourselves.

Another aspect of our core being is creativity. Human beings are creative – we make things. We can't help but make things. Just like the Athenians, who in their sense of incompleteness, made objects of worship.

¹ Edward Sanford Martin, (1856-1939), "My Name Is Legion," in Masterpieces of Religious Verse, ed. James Dalton Morrison (New York: Harper, 1948), 274.

The problem comes when we connect our sense of incompleteness with our ability and need to create things. That's when we make gods of things that should not be worshipped and served, such as busyness – needing to always be doing something in order to fill that void inside.

Or relationships – putting people on an altar only to have them fail to live up to our needs and expectations. Or food and technology – trying to fill that void with the food we consume or the information we take in – too much screen time, while overindulging in food or drink. Not a good combination.

And how about politics? That craving or need to control the situation through power and strategy – in all areas of life, from home to work-and-school to the halls of government and everywhere in between.

When we turn to any of these false gods to fill that void inside, we find ourselves lost, frustrated and heading in the wrong direction, which is where the Athenians were when Paul arrived – they were heading in the wrong direction.

Paul knows this because of that inscription he found, 'To an unknown god.' The Athenians are searching for something, but they don't know what it is.

Here, Paul finds an opening to explore their sense of incompleteness and their need to create. He says, "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."

In that one sentence, Paul points them to the only one who can rightly and fully complete who we are as human beings – God Almighty, our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. God who created all things, the Lord who redeems all things, and the Spirit who gives life and breath to all.

Only God can truly fill that void, that sense of incompleteness deep down inside. Anyone or anything else falls short

Paul points to yet another aspect of who we are in his interaction with the people around him. We are – at the core of our being – interactive. We interact with one another, sharing in activities – creative and otherwise – sharing our thoughts and perspectives – life-giving and otherwise – sharing our needs and feelings – our true needs and feelings and our needs and feelings that are misguided. In our sense of incompleteness we rely on our creative nature to form something in common, through our interactions. Incomplete, creative and interactive – that's part of the core of who we are.

Next, Paul points to a less-obvious and often-overlooked aspect of our core being. In our shared existence as human beings, we are united, closely tied to one another, our fates intertwined.

Or as Paul says, “From one ancestor, (God) made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live....”

We all share the earth with one another, and this should and does unite us as one, whether we recognize it or not. Our unity as one people the world-over is something that is nowhere more clearly seen than from outer space.

Long before civilian spaceflights became possible – with people like Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, Michael Strahan and, yes, even actor William Shatner having traveled to outer space – long before space tourism became a thing – astronomer Carl Sagan made famous a photograph of earth taken from across the solar system on Feb. 14, 1990.

That photo, now known as the Pale Blue Dot, inspired Sagan’s call for humans to “preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.”

From that perspective, it’s easy to see that we as human beings are all united, sharing our planet and our very existence with one another.

At the core of who we are, there is a shared sense of incompleteness, there is a shared spirit of creativeness, there is a shared need for interaction, and a shared reality that we are all united as one, in this thing together, whether or not we recognize it, appreciate it, and honor it – as Children of God, brothers and sister in our shared humanity.

This is how God made us, “so that,” says Paul, we “would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

With that one, final statement from today’s New Testament lesson, that God is not far from each one of us, Paul points to the most important aspect of the core of who we are – we are loved.

We are loved by God who created us in his own image – as creative beings with a need to search for more, to seek a sense of wholeness and completeness. We are loved by God who redeemed us, sending his Son Jesus Christ to interact among us, intercede for us, and place his call upon us to interact and intercede with one another in Christlike fashion.

We are loved by God who sustains us, uniting us as one in the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

If we and all people would come to know and believe that we are loved by God, united as his most beloved creatures on earth, called to interact with one another in the manner of

Jesus Christ, and use our creative spirit to point others to God as the fulfillment of our very being, the only true answer to our sense of incompleteness, then just imagine the peace and love that would prevail the world over.

You are loved, you are united as one, you are interactive and creative, and in Christ, we - all of us - are made whole and complete. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of steadfast love and faithfulness, we your people kneel at the altar. Some of us come offering praise, for your power has delivered us from a time of trial. Some of us come with desperate pleas for your strength and protection as we face life's dark valleys.

But in all things, both good and bad, we come with thanksgiving, for all you have done and all you will do for us.

We pray your comfort and peace upon all who grieve a loss, and especially those for whom their grief has left themselves feeling lost and lonely. Come to them and comfort them, Lord. We pray your Spirit of healing and strength for those dealing with sickness and disease; struggle, and uncertainty.

We lift up prayers of thanksgiving for those celebrating milestones in life. We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.