

Interconnectivity (Part One)

“In God we live and move and have our being”

Reflection 55 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

To me, one of the joys of Easter or of World Communion Sunday is that on that day hundreds of millions of people all over the world – in many different languages, with many different traditions and customs – are doing this one thing, commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus. But of course this happens every Sunday.

All this points to our interconnectedness. And it’s good to see the interconnectivity of things, the interconnectivity of all things, of all that is. All this is part of the way more and more people think today. They see connections everywhere. So one of the books we discussed a few years ago in our Interfaith Book Club was one by Union Theological professor, Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*. And it was one of the best we read. But I remember even before that, my friend John Grady visiting here and telling me about his church in Boulder, Colorado – that it was all about interconnectivity. The minister there would say over and over, “We’re all interdependent. We’re all interconnected.”

So more and more people these days see that we’re all in this together, so it matters, it matters to all of us, when there’s a shooting in Orlando, or hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees pouring into Europe, or tidal flooding in Miami or a stampede at the Hajj in Mecca that kills hundreds. And so people today seek out churches that address not just their own stuff but global issues, global concerns of human flourishing everywhere. It’s good then that this is what Scripture was saying all along.

Consider Luke’s account of the apostle Paul visiting the great city of Athens in Acts 17:22-31. Athens was, it is true, a city in political decline. It had been since the Golden Age of Pericles in the fifth century BC. But it was still the intellectual capital of the Roman world. It was the Oxford and Cambridge, the Harvard, Yale and Princeton all-combined, of the ancient world. Hundreds of years earlier Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had walked its streets and taught and debated in its public forums. Now in Acts 17, the writer Luke, in verse 21, describes the Athenians as spending “their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas,” as still happens in many student unions and college cafés today.

Into these conversations usually loud and opinionated, Paul inserts himself “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (verse 18). And eventually he is brought before a meeting of the Areopagus, the chief Athenian court for morals and religion, and invited to make his case. Now visibly surrounded by temples and shrines – the monuments and intellectual glory of Athens – essentially what Paul says is this: God is not the made, but the maker (verse 24), and it is always a mistake to worship what our own hands have made. Paul goes on: God has guided history. He is behind the rise and fall of nations. All nations. And God made us so that we instinctively long for him (verse 27). Moreover, he is not far from each one of us. Life’s basic truths are simple and accessible. They’re what you already know in your heart to be true, or could know, if you could somehow get past your ego, past the things that preoccupy and distract you, past the places you’re stuck, and just stop and look and see. So now the days of thrashing around in the dark and not knowing are over (verse 30). God has revealed himself in Jesus. And

now everyone everywhere must respond. A time of accountability is coming (verse 31). And the proof of all this is the matter of the resurrection. This man Jesus was raised from the dead.

It's a remarkable speech. Paul begins where his listeners are, with their notion of an altar with the inscription, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." He sees the connections and he makes the connections. He even cites a "Hymn to Zeus" in reference to God. He shows mastery of the culture. He speaks the language of his audience. He essentially restates Jewish-Christian belief in Greek form. The teaching is biblical, but the idiom is classical.

Then, just then, in verse 31 – to these classically-educated, sophisticated brainiacs of Athens – he throws caution to the wind and asserts the resurrection of Jesus. He does it because he has to. He knows that the resurrection of Jesus is life's central, foundational truth. But if that's where he's headed, I want us to see how he gets there. And that is by reminding his listeners that God "is not far from each one of us." From any of us. It was this that Jesus always taught, as in praying to God in John 17:3, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Jesus prays that we might know God, that we might connect to God directly, encounter his presence, know him intimately as only two people who love one another can, and experience the divine flow so that streams of living water might flow from within us. And this – that we have this right now or could have – he calls eternal life!

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week