

Message: "Hidden in Plain Sight" - 5-10-26

Scripture: Acts 17:22-31

<sup>22</sup>Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup>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.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup>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, <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>From one ancestor he 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, <sup>27</sup>so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup>For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' <sup>29</sup>Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup>While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Many of you know there are a variety of versions of the Bible out there, known by their acronyms. For example, there's the NIV or New International Version which is a fairly recent translation used in many churches for worship and study. There's the GNT or Good News Translation which is popular with more evangelical denominations; there's the CEV or Contemporary English Version which young people and youth groups find more readable; and for those whose taste is more along traditional lines, there's the KJV or King James Version, full of the thee's and thou's and thine's of poetic old English. In our church we typically use two versions: we use the NRSV or New Revised Standard Version which is very common in mainline denominations; or we use the PJV which is the Pastor John Version, a version which is, of course, without peer. There are over 450 recognized or creditable English versions like these out there in the world; but when you expand the criteria to include languages other than English, it turns out that there are precisely a gazillion versions of the Bible in the world.

But I long to find a particular version that has yet to be made; I would call it the BTTITSWS version, which stands for "Bring The Text Into Today's Specific World Situations" version; this version would seek to bring the heart of the Biblical messages directly into today's specific context. I would be the first to purchase the BTTITSWS version of the Bible for the reason of working with

passages like the one we have today, a passage virtually screams out its relevance to today's world.

Since we don't have a BTTITSWS version of the Bible, allow me to share what a BTTITSWS version of our passage today might sound like. Here we go:

"Then Paul stood in front of the United States Capital in Washington, DC and said, "Americans, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went across your country and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found idols everywhere. There are idols made to worship movie stars and famous people; idols made to worship sport stars and teams; idols made to worship music groups and performers. You have idols made out of product brand names and slogans, car brands and political parties and perfumes; I see idols to many excesses of food and drink and sex; I find idols to power and control, especially idols made out of political figures and presidents; and you have so very many idols made to worship violence in its many forms. You even have a television show called "American Idol" that worships various talented individuals as they perform (many of them not very well, I might add). But above all, you have so many altars built to worship self-interest and vanity, as if you cannot seem to get enough of yourselves (one idol in particular stands out, the idol manifest in what is called a "selfie"). Many of those altars are nothing more than mirrors."

Paul continued: "You have so many idols and altars that it is clear you are searching and exploring every possibility of higher meaning and greater value in life; but with so many idols and altars it is obvious you are struggling to find anything that actually works, that is able to satisfy the deeper yearnings we all have for meaning, purpose, and value."

Paul then said to the people of America, "idols and altars are not the answer. Any god who is created by human hands or human minds cannot be very divine. In fact, idols and altars keep us from God, for God cannot be contained by anything made by us. God is much more accessible than that."

That's the rub, isn't it? Humankind strives for meaning and substance and value and worth and creates all kinds of things that would seem to provide what is needed for life; but then, needs become confused with wants, and our wants begin to control our lives, until we've created a whole assembly of things that promise the world but leave us eventually wanting and increasingly searching for the newest thing or greater experience - we make idols with greater fervency, not realizing it is their impossibility of provision that is driving us insane.

How insane? This insane - this reflects our present state of affairs, with the president of our country unveiling an actual idol - of himself. This is the 15 foot gold statue of Donald Trump that was recently unveiled at his golf course at Doral, Florida; it was dedicated by Evangelical pastor Mark Burns who said, and I quote, "This is not a golden calf," where upon the nation as a whole collectively said "Riiiiight." To be absolutely clear, an idol is defined as a material object—typically a carved image or statue—that is worshipped as a deity, or a person who is greatly loved, admired, and revered - and yes, this is from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The definition also says idols "often represent a false god or something held in excessive, devoted admiration."

I feel like thanking our president for providing an absolutely perfect example of what Paul was talking about when he warns us about idols and false gods of which there are so very many these days, just as it was in the time of Paul. A fifteen-foot gold statue of a man may indeed not be a golden calf - but it serves exactly the same purpose.

It is easy to sense Paul turning over in his grave over all of this, for we have so much of the same kind of idolatry going on in our world today as he faced back then -- and Paul speaks through the ages to address our present insanity. He says that "<sup>24</sup>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; he never abides in idols of gold or silver or stone or anything that is formed by the art and imagination of mortals. God is not served by human hands; and yet, he is not far from each one of us. We live and move and have our being in God even as we resist God and try to make God obey our command; God stays with us even as we strive to distance ourselves from God."

It calls to mind one of my favorite stories as told by the noted Jewish Theologian named Mel Brooks - you know, the director of such films as "Blazing Saddles" and "Young Frankenstein." Well, Mel Brooks also had a comedy routine called "The 2000 Year Old Man" back in the 1960's in which he portrayed a two thousand year old man being interviewed. Carl Reiner was the interviewer who'd ask him questions about what life was like as civilization was being born, which the 2000 year old man had witnessed. One of my favorite scenes is where Carl asks the 2000 year old man to explain the origin of God, how humans began worshipping a deity. The two thousand year old man says, "Well, way back in time, in the early days, we had a god; his name was Phil, and he lived several caves down from our own; he was a big guy who you didn't want to get on the wrong side of, but he was

also pretty nice to us all and did a lot of things to help us out, so for a time we worshipped him. One day, a thunderstorm came up, and a lightning bolt hit Phil. We gathered around and saw that he was dead. Then we said to one another, 'There's something bigger than Phil!' "

That's the point Paul is making: There's always something bigger than Phil; there's always something greater or more powerful or more mysterious or more complex than what human minds can embody. That's what makes God God, and idols ridiculous. God will always be uncontainable by any idol of human making; God needs no physical altar made by us for his worship. It is the idols we make and the altars we construct that more often keep us from God than help us know God; it is the idols we make and the altars we construct that block us from seeing the God who is all around us as well as within us. This God is made visible in the lives of all who understand the sacredness of life in all its forms; this God is made obvious in the lives of those who have experienced the miracle of unconditional love and practice its pattern with others; this God is seen where the way of Jesus is practiced in real time with real people, the way of feeding the hungry and visiting those in prison and uplifting the oppressed. This God is made known in the breaking of bread with friends and enemies, with family and strangers, seeking the common needs of humanity together. This God is to be found in all these ways - and, if we let him, this is a God will always help us with the finding.

In these days of false idols and flagrant egos, in these times where self-promotion and excess define so very much of the world, in these moments when those in power employ violence and death in pursuit of power, it is more important than ever to demonstrate our rejection of such worship in all the ways we can. Yes, it means protesting and marching and giving voice to the wrongs of our age; it means calling out false worship for what it is. Yes, it also means voting for change and pursuing accountability for those who break the laws of justice and morality. And yes, it means recognizing all idols for what they are - false gods delivering false hope, distracting us from the God Jesus revealed to the world.

But perhaps the most important ways to demonstrate our rejection of the idolatrous practices in our world is to be stubborn in our hope and steady in our living as followers of Jesus. As Paul says, we are the beloved of God, in whom we live and move and have our being - all the time and everywhere. Everyday life is where we find God present as we love each other as Jesus showed us how; everyday moments are where we discover grace for ourselves as we extend it towards others and find it was God's gift all along; everyday experiences where we

tip the balance of conversation towards compassion or move the needle on encouragement or press the matter of honesty will find God attentive and engaging.

The idols and altars we humans create won't always be so obvious as a golden 15-foot statue on a golf course lawn, but we all tend to make them out of whatever speaks out of our desires. And they all carry the same danger, of distracting us from God. If we follow Jesus, and if we want to recognize the God whom he revealed, it's pretty simple, really, even if it's not particularly easy - live and move and have your being in Jesus; live as Jesus lived, think as Jesus thought, love as Jesus loved. Everyday; with everyone; in all the ways you can; all the time. You won't be able to miss God if you do.