

Acts 17:22-31  
 Psalm 66:7-18  
 1 Peter 3:13-22  
 John 14:15-21

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 Year A

### Paul's Happy Thought

In last week's sermon we heard Elizabeth+ talk about Stephen-the church's first martyr and deacon (bit unnerving how those words are put together, isn't it?) Elizabeth told us that Stephen was so in love with Jesus that he could not hold in the ecstasy of that love. He wanted everyone to hear, to feel the heart bursting love that he had for Jesus, the passion which he had for God.

Stephen couldn't stop preaching, he was so overwhelmed by the good news, the gospel of *hope* that Jesus had brought into the world, that he had to speak, to say what he felt out loud, no matter what the cost. It was so important to him to get the word out to the people so they could understand how much they were loved by God.

I have spent a lot of time recently thinking about Stephen, and have wondered what happened in him, what broke loose, that caused him to fall so in love with God, with Jesus? And then I read today's reading from Acts, which helped with me further explore my wonderings, because in this reading we hear from another, who was also madly in love with God, who couldn't stop spreading the good news of Jesus; his name of course, was Paul.

Now Paul certainly, had not always been madly in love with Jesus, or the good news that his disciples preached. The truth is the first time we ever hear of Paul in scripture, earlier in Acts, is at the very stoning of Stephen, by the crowds, in Jerusalem, where we are told that *Paul approved of their killing of him...*<sup>1</sup> and even more the same Paul, himself, continued on for a time, persecuting the early church and those who themselves were madly in love with Jesus.

But God, who *indeed... is not far from each one of us*, (those are Paul's own words) and never gives up on us, offered a new way for Paul, correcting his persecutory ways by simply loving him. And Paul, so overwhelmed by this love was transformed forever into the arms of God's love on the roadside to Damascus. God's love for Paul refocused him that day, and after that he too could not stop talking about this passionate love that God had infused into his heart.

So today in our reading from Acts, we find that same Paul, lover of God, in Athens, freshly run out of Thessalonica and Beroea, for stirring up more of this love of God in the people there, and freaking out the authorities, just like Stephen had done before him. Not dissuaded and full of the *spirit*, Paul had moved onto Athens, still preaching, still so in love with God that he couldn't help himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 7:60b

The renowned philosophers of Athens were curious about Paul...*what does this babbler want to say...*<sup>2</sup> they wondered out loud, in the verses just before the one we heard today. So they brought him before the *Areopagus*, that was the governing council of Athens, and he was asked to make an *accounting* for himself and this good news he was preaching; an *accounting just like our letter from Peter says, of the hope that was in him, the hope, the love* that he had been proclaiming everywhere he had been traveling, since that day on the Damascus Road.

Paul really didn't have much trouble *accounting for the hope that was in him, that abided within him*, and breathed out of him. Oh, I'm sure he had his days, we all do, but Paul allowed for the indwelling of the *spirit* in him, and he let it rise to the surface of his being like yeast, rising over and over again, spilling out into one crowd after another. This could happen because he knew the *hope* that was in him, was God's unending, ecstatic love for him. And he knew, no matter what, that he was never out of God's reach.

I like to say that the *hope* and love that God, that Jesus indwelt in Paul's heart was his "happy thought." Nothing could take it away. This unending happy thought of God, took him through the days and the years which, were not always so easy when his ministry was not always so clearly accepted or understood. But, because of this understanding of the happiness God brought to him, of the *hope in him*, Paul, ultimately knew what he was about. And what he was about was to be a reflection; a mirror of the spirit of *truth* of God's love that he knew lived in him, and in all people.

And with this knowledge, he told the *truth and hope that lived in him* straight out to all who would listen. The Athenians in their varied ways of *groping* to understand God were no exception. He talked directly with them about God who... *made the world and everything in it,...and he called to them to understand that...God does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands...that they ought not to think that God is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.*

Paul was talking about the *spirit of truth*, the God of love which, lived in him and lives in us, even today. His *truth* telling was not spoken or shared in a way that was meant to divide God's people but, to instead, bring them together-all of us together-to open wide all of our hearts to God; a refocusing to help us see clearly that God lives inside of us, not in the exterior, but in the interior of our hearts.

It is that refocusing, that clearing of our vision that is quite like what we feel when we fall madly in love. Everything else that we thought was so important to us, fades away, is put down, and laid aside. Because the love that we have and receive penetrates the *truth* of our hearts so strongly, it knocks us head over heels, emptying and releasing everything that we were hanging onto so tightly, and refilling our hearts with that unmitigated joy, that happy thought, that only love can bring.

Reflecting, this unmitigated, head over heels love is what Paul's work was all about. He wanted everyone to taste, and share in this joy that God had brought him to. He refocused every crowd

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:18b

he spoke to, calling them to stop and take an *account*, to examine the *hope, the truth*, the love and the happiness that is God, that he understood lived within them. Inviting them, and now us, just as the voice of Jesus had invited him that day on the road to Damascus, to put everything else aside, so we too can fall madly in love with God, and let go of everything that is standing in our way to Jesus' love for us.

God is and means to be our happy thought too. In God, *we live and move and have our being; the spirit of truth lives in us too*. It is the promise that Jesus made the disciples before he ascended. It was a promise that none of us would ever be alone, and would always find his love inside our hearts. And, because he left us full of this love, we too are called to spill out and bring new ways of unending love, by talking about, and acting out of this love.

The *spirit of truth* is aching to move outside of us as it was for Paul, in all the ways of being and living that we bring to the world that is so various and wonderful. You may think we are spilling out enough- perhaps-but there is more spilling out to do, it is endless really.

There are more *ways to live and move and be*. It is God's *hope* that we are not afraid to empty out all of that love that God has put in our hearts, it God's *hope* that we will not be afraid to show the world how much we are in love with God, and it is God's *hope* that we will lay everything else aside and be the *spirit of truth* that is in our hearts, and share it with the world.