

“Be”

Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen NPMC, October 25, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 46, Acts 17:22-29

Hymn: Be Still and Know (Arr. Jack Schrader)

HWB 498 – He Comes to Us as One Unknown

Acts 17:22-29, NRSV: ²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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, ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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, ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.’

²⁹ 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.

“it is a serious thing

just to be alive

on this fresh morning

in the broken world.” – Mary Oliver, “Invitation” ¹

This is our final Sunday of our worship series on the contemplative prayer from Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God.”² Following the prayer practice, we have been whittling away at the words of the verse each week. Today, we are left with one final word: “Be.” Now you may be wondering if that’s enough to go on. Is there such thing as a one-word prayer? I think so. Certainly Mary Oliver’s words about the wonder and vulnerability and gift of being alive suggests that this in itself can be a prayer.

¹ From: Mary Oliver, *A Thousand Mornings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013). See <https://wordsoftheyear.com/2017/08/28/invitation-by-mary-oliver/>

² The instructions for this prayer come from: <https://gravitycenter.com/practice/be-still/> There is also a video by *The Work of the People* that can be used for the prayer: <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/be-still>

Paul's words in Acts 17 give some context to this prayer. It's part of his sermon to the people of Athens, who worship a whole bunch of gods and goddesses as statues within their temple. Paul points out that one of these statues is "an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god'" or goddess (v. 23). And Paul claims to be there to tell



"An Altar to the Unknown God" at a museum in Rome – by Sailko (Wikimedia Commons)

them about this 'unknown' divinity, to make this god/ess known as Yahweh, the Creator of the world who is a living God, the God of Life (v. 23-24). So he differentiates their pantheon of gods and goddesses – which exist as statues in "shrines made by human hands" – from the God of Life, who created the whole world and "gives to all mortals life and breath and all things" (v. 24-5). And this great Creator God is also "not far from each one of us," says Paul, "For 'In [God] we live and move and have our being'" (v. 27-8). Paul concludes,

that we are all the children of this living God, and "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" (v. 29).

This phrase, "in God we live and move and have our being" is a powerful one. It means that Paul is claiming that God is the Living God, the Creator of Everything, the

one who said, “Let there be...” and the world was. The one who called Godself, “I am who I Am” in the burning bush, as we reflected on a few weeks ago. This God is not inanimate, but being itself – “a verb – the most active and dynamic of all,” says theologian Mary Daly.³ And yet this living God is also as close to us as our own breath. It shows us that just to be alive is to be in God, to be sustained by God. We exist in God, who surrounds us like a mother’s womb, sustaining and nourishing us. This kind of intimate image for God may be somewhat startling to us, but it’s quite common in the tradition of Christian mysticism, among those who have emphasized not so much obedience to God but rather spiritual union with God.

Teresa of Avila, for example, emphasized that because we are made in the image of God, we reflect the “*great dignity and beauty*” of God. But this is something we forget. She says, “*It is no small pity and should cause us no little shame that ... we do not understand ourselves and know who we are.*”⁴ We are those who live in God, and in whom God lives. Jim Finley explains what Teresa means: “Teresa helps us by laying bare our situation: our situation is God. In God we live, and move, and have our being. ... [And] we tend not to see the God-given godly nature of ourselves subsisting in God, sustained in God.” There is “a love that’s sustaining us breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat,” and this love is who we really are.⁵ We live and have our being in God. So this is our prayer: **Be in God. Be.**

³ Quoted in: David Wheeler-Reed, “What the Early Church Thought about God’s Gender,” *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/what-the-early-church-thought-about-gods-gender-100077>

⁴ Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle* quoted in: Jim Finley, “Turning to the Mystics: Teresa of Avila,” *Centre for Action and Contemplation Podcast*, June 22, 2020, <https://cac.org/podcasts/teresa-of-avila-session-1/>, 2, 4.

⁵ Finley, 4, 6.

The second part of our being in God, however, is in how we live in the world. We in the Mennonite faith tradition have always emphasized that faith isn't so much an abstract belief, but something lived. It reminds me of a quote from theologian Dorothee Soelle:

The question which is often put to me, 'Do you believe in God?', usually seems a superficial one. If it only means that there is an extra place in your head where God sits, then God is in no way an event which changes your whole life We should really ask, 'Do you live out God?' That would be in keeping with the reality of the experience.⁶

It's a good question: Do you live out God? I take it to mean, does our image-of-God-ness determine the way that we live, the day-to-day decisions we make? How do we know when we're doing this?

In her book, *Untamed*, Glennon Doyle writes about learning how to use mindfulness to make tough decisions. It began during a major crisis in her life. She discovered that her husband had been unfaithful to her, and she found herself struggling to decide what to do next. Then she stumbled on the words: Be still and know.⁷ So she decided to start with ten minutes of silence or stillness: "After the kids left for school, I shut myself in a closet, sat down on a towel, closed my eyes, and did nothing but breathe." At first it was hard – ten minutes "felt ten hours long," she said, and her mind was restless, planning grocery lists, wanting to check her phone. But after practicing for a while she was able to reach a place of deep stillness and calm, and in that place, she was able to find clarity: "I can *know* things at this level that I can't on the chaotic surface. Down here, when I pose a question about my life... I sense a nudge. What I learned... is that God lives in this deepness inside me." In that calm and stillness

⁶ Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 186.

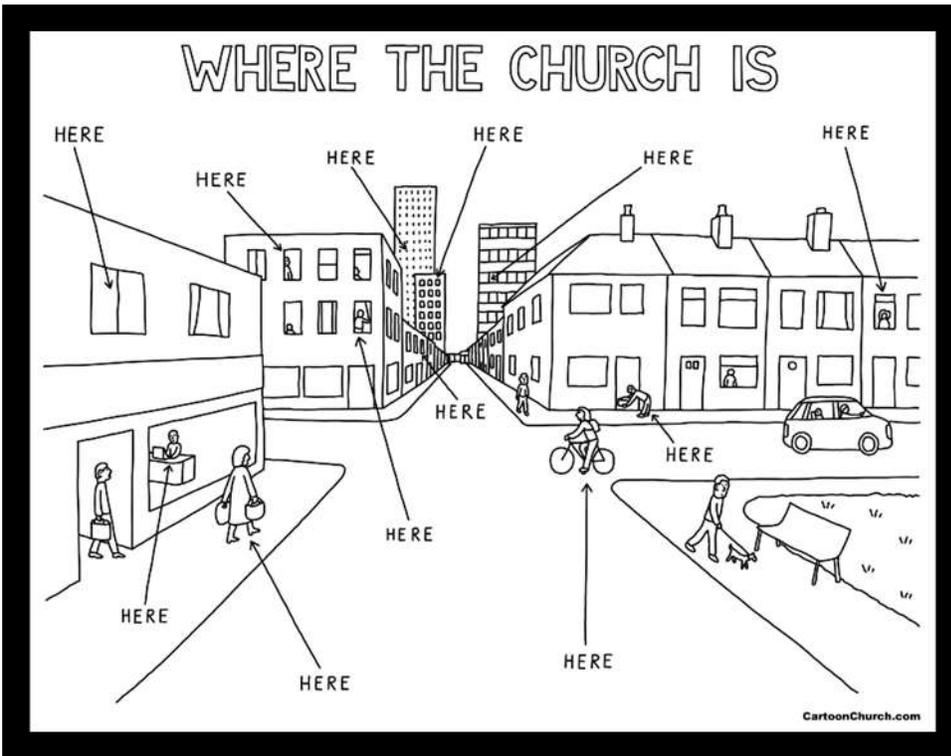
⁷ Glennon Doyle, *Untamed* (New York: The Dial Press, 2020), 55-56.

of just “being” for 10 minutes a day, she could “recognize God’s presence and guidance.”⁸ She says she eventually learned to do this wherever she found herself, so that she didn’t have to interrupt a board meeting to go hide in a closet to make a decision! So her story shows us that we need to learn to Be so that we can live wisely, make good choices, and live out God.

Right now, though, we may be grieving the places we cannot be, the things we cannot do, the people we cannot be with, including this faith community, which cannot gather all together. I know it has been hard to adjust to the strict limits on our lives these days, and I think it’s okay to name that and grieve it. But I have also been encouraged by the ways in which we can continue to “be” the church for each other and for our community, even when we cannot “go to church.” For some that has looked like calling or sending messages or cards to other people to check in. For others, it’s been contributing to worship or children’s videos, or it’s been helping figure out the nuts and bolts of reopening and cleaning and caring for our building and continuing to gather safely for this year, at least, of adapting to pandemic life. For others, it’s been continuing to work in front-line jobs as teachers or health-care workers, or to continue caring for elders or children. For others, it’s been collecting donations for foodbanks for our neighbours. Wherever we live out these act of love and care, that is where we are being church for each other; that is where we are living out God. In all this, we are reminded that the church is not the building but the people, even when they are scattered. We aren’t called to “go to” church, but to “be” the church. And we continue to be the church, even in these times. That’s who we are, and who we will continue to be. It’s like that

⁸ Doyle, 57-58.

cartoon⁹ about where the church is, and it shows a city landscape with arrows all over



the place: the church is here, and here and here.

Be. Be in God. Be the church. This is our one-word prayer that embraces all life and breath, all that lives and moves and has its being in God: “Be.” We close with a prayer from Mary Jo Leddy:

Still
I breathe in You
You breathe in me
I live in You
You live in me
I come from You
I go to You
You in the beginning
You in the end
From You
With You
For You / Forever. Amen.¹⁰

⁹ Cartoon by Dave Walker, <https://cartoonchurch.com/content/cc/where-the-church-is-20/>

¹⁰ Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 149.