

Acts 17:22-31 Pastor Bill Uetracht 5/21/17 6 Easter

I grew up in Cincinnati, where baseball was king, where names like Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, Tony Perez, Dave Concepcion were spoken as often as the names of our relatives. Growing up there, I was always a big baseball fan. I listened to the Reds' games almost daily. I followed the Reds so closely I could have probably told you most of their batting averages and the E.R.A.'s of their pitchers.

But my connection to baseball was not limited to watching it or listening to it on the radio. Baseball and Cincinnati Reds' baseball was something that I participated in. When I was relatively young I got a pitchback, a little device that enabled me to throw a hardball at it and then receive it back. Well, as I utilized that pitchback, I would announce baseball games. "We're in the bottom of the ninth; the Reds are behind 4-1. The bases are loaded. There are two outs. And Johnny Bench is at the plate. Here's the 3-2 pitch. (I always loved 3-2 pitches.) Smack! She's going. She's going. She's gone! And this one belongs to the Reds." (Joe Nuxhall, the announcer, the youngest player ever in Major League Baseball history, always said that when the Reds won!)

For me, baseball was no spectator sport. It was something that I was intimately involved in. When I got older I found a new love when it came to sports—the sport of triathlon. And part of the reason that I fell in love with this sport is that it is so participatory. You don't just do one sport; you swim, you bike, and you run.

Now I am not offering a critique of those who simply like to watch sports; there is something very good about joining together with friends or family and cheering on teams. But I do think that sport at its best is not observed, but participated in. And we live in a culture that too often invites us into passive observation not simply of sports, but life itself.

As you confront our readings for today, you can't help but reach the conclusion that this thing we call the Christian faith is not a spectator sport. It is something that compels, requires, and invites us into active participation. To *get it*, is not to remain on the sidelines. It is no surprise, therefore, that we who are preoccupied with Jesus are said to be "disciples." Disciples follow someone. Discipleship is not about observation or mere

admiration. Discipleship is dynamic. It involves active following, a deep relationship. It is not for spectators.

Sadly, the view of God that many people in our culture have is that of spectator written large. He's the "man upstairs" many say. Bette Midler beautifully sings of God as dealing with the world "from a distance." God is, the Greeks once said, the "unmoved mover," almost the passion-less one who is in charge, dealing with the world from above, needing nothing. But that is not the God of the Bible. Look at what the Gospel of John says today: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and the Spirit will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." Unmoved mover? A spectator from a distance?

The Gospel of John uses such circular talk, the kind talk that led the church eventually to speak about the Trinity—God experienced as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God, the tradition would have us know, is not some detached man upstairs, but rather relationship itself. The primary thing that the Trinity tells us is that God is relational. God is dynamically involved even in God. Jesus, the Son, is in relationship to the Father, asking the Father to bless the community that he is about to leave behind. And the blessing will be in the form of the Advocate, the Spirit, who will make it clear that Jesus has not fully left them, that they are not orphaned. The Spirit will bring his presence, the Spirit who comes from the Father. Holy mackerel, this is all such relational stuff. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

God is not some spectator. The very essence of God is involvement, relationship. God participates in God. God is not "the man upstairs," watching everything going on. God is the energy of life. God is the dynamism of life that brings life to life, that links people to people, that assures people that they are not alone, that places them right in the midst of love. Jesus in John says that, "The one who lives within his commandment to love is the one, obviously, loves him; and the one who loves him will be loved by his Father, and he will love them." To be connected to Jesus is to be drenched in love.

Spectator religion is popular, always has been and probably always will be. Our first lesson makes that quite clear when Paul addresses Athens, a community that appears to be very religious, a community where signs of religiosity are ubiquitous, everywhere to be found. Big edifices dedicated to all kinds of gods were a dime a dozen. : “Athenians, Paul says, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Now I choose to hear in those words both affirmation and critique. “You obviously are very religious people—so religious that you even have an altar dedicated to ‘an unknown God.’ You want to make sure that you cover all the bases. A religious spirit is commendable. It can be an opening to the deeper things.”

But I also think that Paul’s words contain a critique: “You appear to be very religious people. But like much religion, yours misses the mark. Your generic religion is not what the Christian faith is after. ‘What you worship as unknown, I proclaim as much more real, as revealed, as experienced in the very stuff of creation. The One I bring to you is not confined to buildings of stone. The One I am talking about is not a spectator, one who stands at a distance. The One I am worshiping is the One in whom we live, move, and have our being. This One is intimately near. So near that you are a child of this One. Your life, your meaning, your status are not distant from the very foundation for meaning and status. You are deeply connected to the life of life itself—so connected that you are wired to search for God, grope for the God in whom you live and move and have your being. You are wired not for spectatorship.’”

I suspect if Paul were addressing us in the United States he would start out with some of the same words that he began his Acts sermon with: “I can see that you are religious in every way. Wow, those casinos, shopping malls, non-ending car lots reveal that you are searching for some pretty big things. And wow, you have people who talk about God all the time. They say it’s time to bring God back to the schools, God back to the halls of power. They always want to defend God in the public arena.”

I think Paul if he were to look at our situation today might identify our “civil religion”—the kind of generic religion that shows up in the airwaves, comes off the lips of our politicians, props up our lives, our values, our systems, the kind of religion that turns God into a spectator who nods his head in agreement with us, especially when we appear to be religious in

some kind of generic way, when we speak the name of God often and politely. But God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being. God is as near as our breathing. And this God is not some spectator who needs us simply to speak his name in public, who applauds everything we do and everything we stand for.

This God calls us, according to Paul, to repentance. The nearness of God means that life is not lived on our own terms. The nearness of God brings about an urgency for us to deal with ourselves, to turn our lives to the very love in which we live. Love saturates life, as Jesus tells his disciples today. Love is what life means and what it is all about. Love is as near as our breathing. To repent is to turn to love. To repent is to live within the love that even the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live within.

Paul in his sermon says that when all is said and done, Jesus, the One raised from the dead, is the one who gets to judge the world. I find that to be good news. For if Jesus, love itself, gets to speak the final word, then the last word is one of love. That makes good sense to me. Love brought it all into being. Love has sustained it all. And love will get to bring it all to a love-filled end.

It's love that you are being asked not to be a spectator of. It's love that you are being asked to participate in. It's love that is searching for you, groping for you, and longing for you to grope for it. And love is no spectator sport.