

God is not far
Acts 17:16-34
April 30, 2006

What an exciting day this is! I am excited about hearing the *Gloria* -- forty voices, seven-piece brass ensemble, organ, timpani, percussion. It surely will be a glorious anthem of praise!

And I am excited about our wedding reunion, about all of you who have come today to renew your marriage vows and to help us celebrate this church's 150th year. At least twenty-three couples married by this church will come shortly to the front of the sanctuary to renew their marriage promises in our presence and in God's presence, some married almost sixty years and others married less than two years.

It brings me particular joy to share this wedding reunion with at least eight couples I married myself! Doing weddings is one of the great joys of ministry. What a privilege it is for me to share in such a personal and memorable event! What a privilege it is for me to be able to get to know each couple and to share their thoughts and feelings and hopes at this most meaningful time in their lives.

And doing weddings is a great joy for the church. What a privilege it is for us to have a part in bringing families together and in nurturing them as they grow up in our midst.

But doing weddings is rather different from other things we do as a church. Doing weddings is not like doing baptisms or doing communion or doing funerals. The event is focussed on promises two people make to each other, not so much on promises we make to God or God makes to us. Some people think churches should not be involved in the wedding business at all, that weddings are really a function of the state, because marriage is a social, rather than spiritual, relationship.

It is true that the Bible has little to say about marriage. The texts often used for weddings --

1 Corinthians 13: *Love is patient and kind ... Love never gives up ... Love is eternal ...*

or 1 John 4: *Let us love one another, because love comes from God ...*

or Romans 12: *Love must be completely sincere ...*

or Colossians 3: *To all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity*

-- have nothing to do with the love between husband and wife. These texts and others like them speak about love in a broader context, the love we have for other human beings, friend and stranger alike, and the love each of us has for God. When the Bible speaks of love, it addresses the hope of intimacy with God and the hope of genuine community with each other.

When the Bible does speak of marriage, it almost always uses marriage as a metaphor, a symbol of a greater and deeper reality. Marriage is important to the church because it is a symbol, a sign, of a greater and deeper reality. A good marriage is a living witness to the possibility of a love that is lasting and resilient and unconditional. A good marriage is a sign for all of us of a kind of love we may all experience, married or not.

When the Sadducees were arguing the question of resurrection with Jesus, they posed the hypothetical problem of a seven-times widowed woman. They wanted to know when the dead are raised to life, whose wife she would be. Jesus replied by saying that when the dead rise to life, they will not marry. That seems unfortunate!

But I have always taken this to mean that when we are raised to new life with Christ, we will not enjoy less human intimacy than before, but more. We will not need marriage anymore because we will enjoy the level of intimacy marriage may provide with everyone! I am not suggesting we will have multiple sexual partners! This is not about sex, but about the deeper intimacy of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved.

When Paul spoke to the city council in Athens, he was talking about the possibility of a deeper intimacy, of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved ... by God. When Paul first arrived in the city, he was greatly distressed by the rampant idolatry. Everywhere he looked, there was another idol.

The problem of idolatry, the tragedy of idolatry, is that we settle for a poor and useless imitation of the real thing. We settle for something that can never satisfy us, can never save us, can never bring us joy. All the gods of our own creation, all the pretend gods to which we give ourselves -- money or things or sex or power -- leave us empty and disappointed, still longing for the real thing, still longing for a real love, unless our hopes and longings have been already shattered by too much disappointment.

The Athenians were always intrigued by the latest new thing, so they invited Paul to address the Areopagus, the city council. And he said to them: *I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious ...*

It's a clever rhetorical ploy: butter them up, get on their good side, before you hit them with your real message. But I believe Paul was sincere. I believe he was genuinely acknowledging them, genuinely acknowledging their religious impulses, impulses they share with every other human being. He was establishing a point of contact with them.

He was acknowledging their longing to find God, to know God, so that he could tell them that God can be found! God can be known! God is not far!

God is the creator of everything that is, before everything, above everything, beyond everything ... but God is not far!

God cannot be contained in any image we might make or in any house of worship we might make; God is too big for that, too other for that ... but God is not far!

God does not need anything at all from us because God is the source of all things ... but God is not far!

God sets the boundaries of the earth. God sets the boundaries of human history. God is outside our time and outside our space ... but God is not far!

God wants to be found. God wants to be known. God can be known! So know God! Love God! Obey God! Live in intimacy with God! And believe that God knows you, that God loves you, that God desires intimate relationship with you.

Today we celebrate the renewing of marriage promises, a rededication to loyalty and love and lifelong companionship. But as we do, we point to a deeper loyalty, a more profound love, an even more fulfilling companionship.

Today we celebrate one hundred and fifty years of our church's history, a long legacy of working together, of caring for each other, of investing together in our children's future. But as we do, we point to a higher calling, a wider commitment to people near and far, an investment of our whole selves in the future God has in mind.

That future is not far. God is not far. And God invites you and me, all of us, married and unmarried, young and old, men and women, people of color and people of no color, to walk together into that future ...