

So, language matters.

A lot.

But you don't always hear that.

What you hear is people say that words are just words, what really matters is our actions.

Or, if someone says something you take issue with, they might say, oh, you know what I really meant, somehow implying that our words don't have to align with our thoughts or intentions, and that's somehow okay.

But words do matter.

Words that we hear can shape our thoughts.

You hear the same words enough times, and they can shape your reality, your truth.

They can subliminally affect how you understand other people and the world around you.

Today's scripture reading got me thinking about words and I'll tell you why.

So, Paul is talking to the Athenians and there's one verse that I really focused in on, and it's verse 28 when he says, "*For 'In God we live and move and have our being'.*"

We know this.

We know that God is not beyond.

God is not out there, someone different or set apart.

God is not other than.

God is within.

God is woven into us like our DNA.

We are all sacred beings and that sacred spark that's within, that makes us more than carbon atoms bonded together to make molecules, that's God.

God is here.

Embodied.

Not out there, not an old man sitting in the clouds, waiting for us to arrive in heaven.

So, what I take issue with is how we pray.

We appeal to God as if God is beyond us.

Our Lord's prayer starts, "*Our Father, who art in heaven,*"

I don't know, maybe it should say, "Our Creator, who art within."

Also.

Also, that prayer that we say at the beginning of each church service, why is it called the Prayer of Invocation?

Invocation means to call upon something, summon something.

In our Prayer of Invocation, the purpose is to invoke or bring about God's presence among us.

But again, God isn't a being that we have to summon.

God is always there.

It's not like we're a salad and God is the dried cranberries that you add on top and that you can pick out if you don't like them.

We're more like a cake, maybe we're the flour, God is the eggs, I don't know, but once the batter is all mixed together, you can't undo it.

So we can't draw God near us with the Prayer of Invocation because God is always near.

So maybe we should call it the Prayer of Awareness or something.

Because that's what we're really doing.

We aren't calling God into this sacred space, what we're doing is making ourselves aware of God within and around us.

God is embodied.

That's what the whole Jesus movement was all about, showing us how to follow God in this life, these bodies, in this natural world, through our actions, and treatment of others.

Paul knew this, and it's what he was trying to teach the Athenians.

You see, they were trying to make God other than, someone set apart, someone whom you could draw a distinction from.

The Athenians created false idols, and so they were able to say, this is God, we are not.

But the Apostle Paul wasn't having any of it.

At first, he affirms them and says that he sees how extremely religious they are in every way.

It's like he's buttering them up before showing them the error of their ways.

Because he tells them that he walked around their city, carefully looked at the objects of their worship, and they had an inscription, "To an unknown God."

But he tells them, God isn't unknown.

God made the world and everything in it, God is Lord of heaven and earth and God does not live in your shrines.

God is not far from each of us, as Paul said, *For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of [the Athenians'] own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'*

*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.” (Acts 17: 28-29).*

For Paul to preach against the false idols in such a public forum as the Areopagus was incredibly risky.

The Areopagus was where legal decisions were made, and he was speaking before the council, Athens' governing authorities.

He wasn't in a backwater town talking to locals.

He was on a prominent stage.

In this text, Paul is criticized by later Christians for not quoting scripture, for not talking about Jesus, for not compelling the sacrilegious Athenians to get their act together.

But mind you, in 399 BC, just a few hundred years before Jesus was born, Socrates was sentenced to death.

He was forced to drink the Hemlock because he was accused of not being faithful to the Greek gods, of not acknowledging the gods that the city acknowledged, and for introducing new gods to the youth, thereby corrupting their minds.

So surely Paul knew what happened to Socrates

It's understandable that maybe he was hesitant to go to such a powerful group of people and say, hey, you're all wrong, follow Jesus.

Instead he talked to them in a more subtle way, but quoting one of their own.

In trying to help them understand that God is not beyond, but within, he quotes a Greek philosopher named Epimenides.

I'll read you something that he wrote, and you see if it sounds familiar.

This was written in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century, BCE, we aren't sure, but regardless, it was long before Jesus and Paul.

In this text, Minos, is addressing his father, Zeus.

Epimenides writes, *"They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one, Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies. But you are not dead: you live and abide forever, For in you we live and move and have our being."* (Harris, Rendel J. "Expositor," Oct. 1906, 305–17; [Apr. 1907, 332–37](#); Apr. 1912, 348–353).

The lie that he is referring to, which the Cretans tell, is the mortality of Zeus.

Minos doesn't think his dad is mortal, but the Cretans do.

Who do we know who had a tomb fashioned for him, who they tried to kill, but defeated death and lives and abides forever?

Right.

So, Paul uses this text and the subtle implication is that he's talking about Jesus.

They tried to kill him, but they couldn't.

He lives and abides forever.

So, Epimenides was talk about Zeus, Paul was talking about Jesus, and I am using it to talk about God, in whom we live and move and have our being.

In today's world, with the rise in purported "secularism," and cynicism and skepticism, people are trying to kill the message of God's radical, unconditional, unwavering, all-encompassing love.

And I put secularism in quotes because if we believe that God is everywhere, within and around, then there is no distinction between sacred and secular.

For all is sacred.

But that's not what people would have us believe.

Those of us who try to live out this love are cast off as unrealistic Pollyannas, or doormats, because we let people walk all over us without defending ourselves and demanding retributive justice.

But we know that living out the love of God, which is within us, is not being a doormat.

It's staring evil in the face and responding with love, which takes a kind of strength that we can only summon from the divine force within us.

I will leave you with this story from Dr. Dan Clendenin.

*“At lunch last week it was my pleasure to meet a young computer scientist, named Neil, from London who for the last four years has taught at Stanford as a specialist in artificial intelligence.*

*Neil is also a deeply committed Christian who's exploring what it might look like to witness in the work place among his unchurched, thirty-something friends.*

*I was fascinated as he described how he and his buddies back in London understood "church."*

*Forget church at 11am on Sunday, he said.*

*Rather, meet your friends for sports and games on Sunday, then repair to the pub.*

*Meet people on their own terms and at their own places, he said, rather than expect them to come to your church.*

*Neil sounded like a modern version of Paul at the Areopagus...*

*Paul, had been publicly proclaiming the Jesus Way in the marketplaces and synagogues with anyone and everyone...*

*All of so-called "secular" life, and not just "sacred" realms, were spheres of God's loving presence, or at least potentially so — law, literature, medicine, education, the arts, business, government, science, quite literally anything and everything.*

*So, in his own Christian way, Paul viewed the venerable Areopagus as just another place where the Lord of all creation had gone before him and was already present; indeed, said Paul to the Athenians,*



*"He is not far from each one of us."*

There is no sacred and secular, there is no God out there, but not here.

All is sacred precisely because God is everywhere, and it's our job to acknowledge that, through our words, which do matter, and through our actions. Amen.

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