

The Unknown God of the Eyes
Sermon Preached at North Prospect Union UCC
Student Minister: A. Irene Jenkins
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Scripture: Acts 17:2-31

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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. ²⁴The 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, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From 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, ²⁷so 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. ²⁸For ‘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.’ ²⁹Since 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. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

The Unknown God of the Eyes

I was not entirely sure that her son was alive. He was sprawled out on the busy street next to his mom. I looked at her and immediately searched for anything else to stare at. Her once pink sari was soiled in dirt, blood, and rings of sweat marks- the old dry ones running into the new. Her collarbone jutted out beneath the neckline of the fabric. Her baby, naked in her arms and just as dirty as her sari, this woman looked at me with eyes I will never forget. At first I could not stand to look at her. I felt I was invading her space, seeing things I shouldn’t have seen. But, on that first day in India, along the crowded city streets, there were no comfortable places to gaze. She looked back at me... in that moment I prepared myself to have her cry out in pain, to see my white skin and western clothing and resent me, to think we couldn’t possibly have anything in common. The pity and sadness I felt for her choked me as I held back the sense of nausea over the scene and stared blankly into this city which would become my home for the next 5 months. I glanced in every direction- seeing women with bindi marks on their foreheads, men wearing loincloths, cows moving freely, creaky bikes carrying whole families, auto rickshaws everywhere, people relieving themselves, and yet, everywhere there was a strange sense of celebration- nothing about it made sense. They were celebrating Diwali, the triumph of good over evil in every human person. Like much of the scene, this woman undercut my pity- she looked right at me, and *smiled*. With one of the friendliest, purest smiles I can recall. The brown trim around her teeth in that moment framing the white parts which remained. Those eyes were wide and present, open to me as another woman, another citizen, another human. It was at that

moment I knew there was something different about India.

When we imagine Paul entering Athens in today's scripture, there are many who think of India and the supposed idol-worshipping ways of Hindus. We've heard stories about Christian missionaries showing up there and making their views known- As the first missionary Rev. Ziegenbalg notes- your "idol worship is abomination," thus I have no choice but to "call you heathens". Though I could tell you all about how he got it wrong and missed the wonderful parts of Hindu religious life, I'll instead urge you to come to next week's Bible study if you're interested. Rather than being Paul's idol-worshipping audience, the people I met in India already 'got' this lesson. The Athenians and folks gathered around him on that day were people who thought that the philosopher's wisdom was the way to truth. They were self-assured in their grasp on what can be known in their world. As he says in the letter to Romans, those who "professed themselves to be wise became fools". And in Corinthians, the "world by wisdom knew not God". They were not poor and destitute cleaving onto their idols as many want us to imagine. This community, dare I say, was much closer to Harvard University than to the streets of Madras, India. Paul tells them to put aside their obsession with wisdom and to focus on their idol to the "Unknown God". In that idol, you will find my God he says. Let's stop for a minute and consider what this means for us today. Where is the unknown God in our world? I thought about it and immediately was brought to places where literally we think God *could not* be known. Walking along that street in India and seeing that woman, I thought God could not be known by her. How could she possibly have faith or hope in a world living amongst filth and disease. In truth, I was no better than the Athenians who had wisdom to bring to others, thinking they had the path to success and survival mapped out.

As I began to settle into India, I tried to learn about what made these encounters so different. One obvious difference, as we saw in the Children's sermon today, is the bindi, or mark on the forehead indicating one's faith tradition. Known as the "third eye", this mark signifies the "seat of concealed wisdom". When asked, Hindu women say it helps to keep them seeing the divine nature in other human beings. The eyes are a powerful way of thinking about encounter- we know (or thanks to wikipedia we know) that optical tissue is meant to work as a permeable filter, supplying nutrition and cleaning out particles, keeping your eye clear so your vision is good. Though, when our membranes are dry and tough, impermeable, invulnerable to our own experience and to that of others, these filters become trapped. Suddenly it feels that we're looking through frosted glass. When people greet each other with the namaste, they greet with a permeable and vulnerable eye, they honor the goodness and divinity which courses through the veins of the other. "That which is divine in me greets that which is of the Divine in you". Clapping your hands together- one holds the higher, spiritual nature, the feet of Divine (right), while the other is the worldly self, the head of the devotee (left). We indicate to each other that we are both living with God *and* within the world. "I honor the place in you in which the entire Universe dwells, I honor the place in you which is of Love, Integrity, of Wisdom and of Peace, When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, we are one".

What would it look like to make time for the namaste in our lives around Boston? I can't even imagine it happening- we're too busy getting to where we want to go. We don't seem to think it's all that important to engage anyone unless it's expedient or the

right time to do so. How many times do you stop to greet strangers in the grocery store, or neighbors on the streets? How many times do we eat alone because it's easier. Most importantly though, it's hard because we haven't bought into the sheer vulnerability that the bindi and this greeting really require. When we admit for a second that there is an unknown God in our lives, a spark of divinity- one in whom we live, and move, and have our being... We *are* vulnerable. Ours is not a society which likes to be vulnerable- virtually every commercial on TV preys upon our desire to be invulnerable. In contrast, walking along the streets of India, everyone is vulnerable in a visceral and inescapable way. The conditions of life require that people come to grips with this vulnerability. The difference though, is that we're not supposed to look away and feel ashamed about our own experience. We look at one another with healthy eyes- eyes with permeable, vulnerable membranes. We look straight into the eyes of the other and say, I am me- with all of my limitations, but also with my inherent value. I can hold joy and pain together at the same time and smile at you.

As you can guess, I don't think this experience should stay in India. I wanted so badly to come home and greet all people with this namaste and way of seeing the world. My way of seeing things was radically changed. Before India I had begun struggling with depression and could not seem to put myself back together. I was filled with shame as I walked around my college campus—a secret shame and frustration at not being able to fix it and tuck it away behind a carefree façade. When I looked at other people, I found no release. As Andrew Solomon writes in *The Noonday Demon*, depression degrades one's self and ultimately eclipses the capacity to give or receive affection. This “tumble weed” distress thrives on air, leaching your mind until you seem dim-witted even to yourself. Though, when I was let *in* by this Indian woman, and by all of the people whom I met and got to know, I was able to feel the presence of God hooking us together- we didn't have the same issues, the same joys, concerns- the thing we shared was the namaste- we have both pain and joy in our lives, and we are okay with saying it. We are okay with not always knowing how God is present in our world- we worship an unknown God.

Friends, we know that at least 10% of Americans are now on antidepressants and 50% have experienced or will experience depression of some kind in their lives. And yet, we are so uncomfortable with the intense, shattering vulnerability which we feel while in the hands of this noonday demon. You may be wondering why I'm talking about this during our season of Pentecost and celebration...I was too. But...this is the season of highest suicide rates in our country. The time when many people wind up suffocating in their grief and shame. Mainly because this season communicates to them and all people that we should be happy and self-sustained. I can only speak about my own experience, but there is something awful about having someone pity you in your 'condition'. There is something awful about the fact that riding in an elevator in the University health services area feels like an eternity. Everyone huddles into the elevator with eyes cast away, heads down, all consumed by their own struggle. I'm not saying that we should glorify the real and constant struggling of people like this woman in India, but I am saying that we can offer our lives of joy and pain as the presence of the unknown God in our lives. If you have ever wondered how you can be surrounded and yet alone, I want to tell you that I've wondered it too. Depression does not simply vanish with a one-way ticket to India, but real salvation can begin with the courage of witnesses whose gaze is steady. A gaze with

vulnerable eyes... Steady witnesses neither flee in horror to hide their eyes, nor console with sweet words, It isn't all that bad...Something good will come of this. Mourning and sadness deepen our reverence for what is precious, what is already destroyed, what must be embraced with fierce determination, abiding faithfulness. In looking into the eyes of another person, a person who meets us as a steady witness, without judging, without trying to make it better, without trying to bring us wisdom, we are loved in a way which is the true *agape*. The kind of love that meets you right where you stand, not because you've earned it or request it, but because it is the one thing which God can provoke and nurture in every human being. As Paul tells the Athenians, "he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things". That woman and I didn't share all that much in common, but in that instant, we were sharing in the breath of God, knowing we needed it, and feeling okay to take big gulps of it- when you know you need God, when you know that through God you live, move and have your being, you're okay with breathing in deeply- letting yourself be fed. Your okay with letting your lungs and stomach expand fully- taking in the needed breath.

This might be the feeling those two disciples had which Dudley told us about- when they discovered that death was not the end. Mourning the loss of Jesus brought them to a moment of awareness of the dead, a moment that came as surprise, as unexpected grace. This might be the feeling when you have mourned the loss of someone and yet something reminds you that *life holds more than its destruction*. It might be the feeling we get when Dudley and Corey are able to meet us in the place of our pain and be there with us- without judgment or forcing us to have it fixed by our next meeting. It might be the feeling that the homeless men and women have when they receive a sandwich from the Outdoor Church. It might be the feeling that people in nursing homes feel during a visit. My hope is that it's the feeling we have coming into this church. Come, come, whoever you are, come. "I honor the place in you in which the entire Universe dwells, I honor the place in you which is of Love, Integrity, of Wisdom and of Peace, When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, we are one". Namaste. Amen.