

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

5.10.26 - Easter 6

This past Wednesday, a group of St Martin's people stood in front of the ICE offices on 8th Street and Cherry, in a vigil in support and solidarity with immigrants. We were part of a larger effort sponsored by New Sanctuary Movement, to have faith communities sign up to be a witness and presence on that sidewalk every Wednesday for forty weeks. St Martin's was week number 25.

And it was not without some trepidation that we signed up for our week and anticipated how it would go. The scripture I had chosen felt a little risky. How would our offering be received? Would anyone sing along with the hymns and would they be heard? Would any of our folks show up? Would there be confrontation from ICE officers or from police? Would there be rain, hail, heat, or other weather extremes that can come in spring, and would this ruin the whole thing?

It's natural we were anxious. These are fraught times, divisive and tense times. They have redrawn the districts in Tennessee. The Pope is sounding radical and prophetic for simply saying that war is bad. In today's reading from the book of Acts, Paul shows us an example of how to talk with people who see things differently. Paul is preaching about the one God and about Jesus, to a group of people in Athens. When he first comes into the city, he is horrified at all the statues of gods and how people are worshipping them. The Greeks, on the other hand, are not impressed with Paul's faith in Christ and great knowledge of scripture. Who is this babbling? They ask.

To Paul, the Greeks are idol-worshippers. To the Greeks, Paul is a weirdo talking about an invisible foreign god. They seem to have very little to agree on.

Paul tries another way, in this sermon he gives in front of a big rock, the Areopagus. The rock itself is a shrine to the war-god Ares.

Paul could have said to the Greek audience, You bunch of idol-worshippers! Repent now! And the Greeks could have replied, go back home, you babbling!

But instead, Paul steps in their shoes, he acknowledges that what he sees as idolatry is to the Greeks devout religious observance. He begins, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are." He then uses the example of the altar to the unknown god to open their minds to the idea of a God who cannot be represented by a statue or rock.

When Paul quotes to the Athenians, In him we live and move and have our being, he is not quoting scripture, but a Greek philosopher.

Paul is speaking to the Athenians using images and texts that they can relate to. He is meeting them halfway.

And Paul's efforts bring some better results. He does not win spectacular or record-breaking numbers of people for his cause. Some listeners still scoff; some say, Well this sounds strange but I'll keep listening. A man and a woman, Dionysus and Demaris, do join the Jesus movement that day, along with a few others.

Paul stretches himself to speak to this group in Athens, and a handful of people are moved to join him. A handful. But it is enough. Enough to ensure that today we have many followers of Jesus in Athens, and here in Philadelphia. Enough that we are still hearing Paul's sermon read in this space today.

And that's not all. Because when Paul stretches himself, opens himself to speak to the Athenians using language and images they can understand, he is changed, and so are we. In him we live and move and have our being may not have been scripture in Paul's time, but today it is included in prayers and parts of liturgy and in this reading from the book of Acts, and resonates with us so deeply that it has essentially become scripture for us. We have embraced these words of a Greek philosopher, a so-called pagan, as our own.

Paul's willingness to move just a little bit brings a few new followers to his movement. And a little trace of Paul's openness comes along and stays. Both sides are changed. The idea that Jews and Greeks are so different from each other, that their belief and practice are so foreign, has been challenged. By stretching himself, Paul makes an opening for that one God in whom we live and move and have our being to knit together two groups that thought they were so separate, to weave some strands of Greek philosophy into our Christian canon.

I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you, says Jesus in today's Gospel.

Jesus is comforting his friends. He is anticipating the arrival of the Spirit at Pentecost. And, he is revealing something that was true that day and is true here and now. I am in my Father, and you in

me, and I in you. We are all connected. We are all connected, to each other, and to God. All of us. No exceptions.

We could feel that at the vigil Wednesday. Yes, our outdoor liturgy went well, it was received with a great spirit, and yes, people sang and our voices were heard. There was a spirit of joy and peace and love out there on the sidewalk that day. And yes, it did rain, quite hard at times, and even the rain felt like blessing.

For those minutes on 8th Street this week, we were together. The St Martin's community, others who came for the vigil, the people waiting in line to appear in court, the woman waiting with great concern for her husband, who had entered some time ago. We were together with all of them. We were together with the women in reflective jackets who were taking names in the line, keeping track of who went in and who came out and who didn't. We were together with the police across the street, with the drivers passing by. We were together with the people inside, the immigrants, the workers, the ICE agents.

We had a glimpse of what Jesus is saying in this Gospel. We had a glimpse of what is true today and always, but is usually invisible to us. We are not so different. We are not separate. We are all living and moving and being in this same God, we are all knit and woven together in one cloth of many different strands, we are all part of the one Body.

I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

We may not have changed anyone's mind on Wednesday, but in some way that could be felt, we were all changed.

This is our resurrection. It is a truth that cannot die. We are all connected. We don't need to be fearful, we don't need to be anxious, we don't need to know exactly what it all means. We only need to ask, what can we do next? Amen.