

Fumbling Godward

Acts 17:22-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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First, a very Happy Mother's Day to all the mothers and those who care in motherly ways!
You are worth celebrating!

A few days ago, I was chatting with a few friends, and the topic of sermons came up.

One person was critical of pastors whose sermons are full of personal stories. *I don't want someone to just stand up there and talk about themselves! We're there to learn something from the bible, not hear about their lives.*

Another was a bit more sympathetic. *I like stories. What, are you looking for someone to just get up there and try to bore everyone?*

The conversation circled around these two poles for a while. I was mostly quiet. I think my friends sometimes forget that I'm a pastor when they're offering their opinions about what pastors should do. 😊

But eventually it's hard for the only pastor in the conversation to avoid weighing in.

I don't remember the specifics of what I said, but it was something to the effect of, "I can't help but have something of myself come through in every sermon I preach. I don't see my job as to just get up here and dispense bible facts or principles or doctrines or lessons. Preachers should never treat the pulpit as the place to work out all their personal issues, but neither should their stories be absent from their sermon."

For better or worse, I find it impossible to subtract what's going on in the world and in my life from what I preach on a given Sunday.

This is true not only for the one preaching the sermon; it is true for you, as well.

Each week, each of us come to worship with different things occupying our minds, different experiences affecting how and what we hear.

The same Scripture will land differently at different points in our lives depending on what we are facing. The same song may hit us in a completely different way on any given Sunday.

This cannot be otherwise. And it's not a bad thing, not a bug in the system. It's not a failure on our part, as if the goal were to be detached or to hear the truth "objectively." As if that were possible.

God speaks to us through our stories, through our world, and through the story of Jesus that weaves its way through all of it.

And I must be honest—this week, my heart was heavy as I wrote this sermon. If you came to church expecting a light Mother's Day sermon, I am afraid I will be disappointing you.

In the last six days, I have attended two funerals for young men in my orbit who took their own lives.

On Monday, it was a young man whose family was part of the church I grew up in. He sought me out a few years ago, he was looking for a mentor of some kind. We met semi-regularly for a while. He attended our church a few times. He had big questions and big ideals when it came to God, faith, life. He had recently gotten married. His life seemed to be on a good and hopeful path.

Yesterday, it was the stepson of Naomi's sister Michelle. I didn't know him well, but even though he had been through some significant trials, he seemed like a kind, thoughtful, young man who loved his family and loved God.

These were obviously difficult funerals, full of unanswered questions—unanswerable questions—confusion, anger, and a deep sorrow that is difficult to put into words.

These funerals are becoming far too common. The last few decades in the West have been marked by a steep rise in "deaths of despair" (suicides and drug overdoses, mainly). Particularly among the young.

Of course, there are all kinds of explanations for this fog of despair. It's the economy, it's climate change, it's our toxic online spaces, it's brains rotted by "smart" phones, it's unrealistic expectations conditioned by social media, it's broken families, it's polarization, it's individualism, it's consumerism, it's secularism, it's incentivizing victimhood as a status symbol, it's the blasted out landscape of postmodernism or whatever has replaced it, it's Gen X parents who want to be their kids' friends instead of their parents, it's the failure of churches to proclaim and embody a credible faith, it's... The list could go on.

I believe deep in my bones that we need to return to faith, hope, and love—to an affirmation of the goodness of our lives and the trustworthiness of the God who gave them to us. But this seems increasingly difficult for many.

So, I come to our text from Acts this morning with these things in my mind.

When I hear Paul say that,

- God gives life and breath and all things to mortals...
- ... so that we might search for God, fumble about and find him...
- That he is "not far from any of us..."
- ... that in him we "live and move and have our being..."

I can't help but hear these words in the context of these two young lives that could not ultimately find what they were looking for in this life.

The God who is not far from any of us perhaps *seemed* far from them at the critical moment.

The One in whom we live and move and have our being maybe *seemed* unreachable, undetectable, absent.

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There is sense in which our text from Acts can be (and often is) read as a case study in inter-religious dialogue or culturally sensitive evangelism.

Paul stands up in the Aereopagus, a rocky outcrop in Athens that served as the meeting place for the council and supreme court to discuss law, religion.

He has something to say about God and truth and religion. But he doesn't take a wrecking ball to everything the Athenians believe. He starts where they are, calling attention to what they're already doing and what it might say.

Paul compliments them on their spirituality or religiosity. He quotes poets and philosophers that the Athenians would have been familiar with. He tries to show how the gospel is the response to questions they are already asking, a hunger to worship they already have.

We can appreciate the strategy involved here. There is much to commend it. It's a general strategy that I regularly find myself using. Start where people are. Affirm the ways in which people might already be seeking God. Try to build upon what's already there.

But this week, I am less inclined to see this text as a strategy than a diagnostic of the human heart.

God created human beings, Paul says in verse 27,

so that they would search for God and perhaps *fumble about for him* and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

To be human is to be born with a hunger for God. To be human is to fumble Godward.

The simple truth that Paul sees in Athens and which I see all around me is that God has created us to long for him.

The NIV translation of our text this morning begins with Paul saying, "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22).

Paul probably intended this is a compliment and it would have been received as such. This would almost certainly not be the case in our culture. Few people want to be seen as "religious."

Many would prefer to say they are spiritual but *not* religious.

But, like the Athenians, I think we *are* religious in all kinds of ways. We may not write the words "an altar to an unknown God" on the objects of our worship, but to be human is to worship something.

We worship the usual idols of sex, money, and power (Aphrodite, Mammon, Mars, the Greek pantheon).

We worship ourselves in countless ways—our bodies, our identity, our politics, our ideology, our morality (the self is another very old idol going all the way back to Genesis 3—you can be like God!).

And even those who should know better have little use for the word “religion.” It’s not hard to find popular Christian churches, speakers, and authors downplaying or even outright rejecting the word “religion.”

Come to our church, we’re more about relationship and connection than religion. Jesus didn’t come to start a new religion, after all—he came to end religion! We’re nothing like that boring old church you grew up in with all its dry rituals.

I, on the other hand, am growing fonder of the word.

If I’m feeling spicy, when I hear someone use the phrase, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” I will say, “Oh, I’m the opposite! I’m religious but not spiritual!” I usually get some puzzled looks.

The origins of the word “religion,” like most big and important ones, is a subject of debate. But one definition that I have always been drawn to locates it in the Latin word *religare*, which means “to bind.”

The one common thread that runs throughout post-Christian west and our culture of despair is a *lack* of binding ourselves to anything or anyone besides ourselves.

In her book *Strange Rites*, Tara Burton describes our culture’s approach as “intuitional religion”—we do not look outward to discover a truth that precedes us and stands over us, but inward to create truth and meaning for ourselves:

We are... too special, too unique, too singular for the communal demands of ordinary, traditional religion. We curate and render bespoke everything else about our lives. Why should our faith not be similarly fluid?

Why not? Well, I’ll speak for myself here.

Because I am *not*, in fact, too special, too unique, too singular for the demands of ordinary religion. Left to my own devices, I'll come up with something selfish and insufficient.

I need religion to bind me to a truth outside of myself, my own intuitions and preferences. I need religion to provide ancient wisdom, to tell me the sometimes uncomfortable truth about who I am and what I'm prone to.

I need religion to surround me with people who aren't like me, to form an actual *community* instead of a like-minded tribe.

I need religion for confession and absolution and judgment and mercy and transcendence and meaning beyond what I can manufacture for myself. I need to bind myself to Christ and his church to be set free.

I am convinced that this lack of binding—this inward turn of our culture, where everyone creates and curates their own realities according to their own preferences, is playing a *massive* role in the despair that we see all around us.

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We were created with a religious impulse. Paul knew this. Many in our time have forgotten or ignored it and need to be reminded of it.

We were created to fumble toward the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

A danger perhaps is that we kind of think that fumbling Godward is something people do *before* they come to Jesus.

That once we get the real deal, once our misplaced objects of worship are identified and set aside, once “the unknown God” is shown to be “the God made known in Jesus Christ,” the quest is over.

But there is a sense in which fumbling Godward is the task of a lifetime. Perhaps not always to the same degree—I certainly hope that we can get to a place where faith becomes less a restless quest than a stable conviction.

But this side of eternity, we all see through a glass darkly, as Paul says elsewhere.

God seems to have created things in such a way that groping and fumbling will be part of the human experience. That it will take effort, desire, openness to newness. That we will make progress and we will regress. That we will have to learn some of the same things over and over again.

That it won't always be obvious. That there may be some pain in the search. That there will be failure. That we will need to *keep* searching, *keep* seeking, *keep* fumbling.

I've been meditating recently on Jesus' words in the fifth chapter of Luke's gospel, words we talk about a lot out at the jail on Mondays:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

I think we often imagine, "Yes, and then Jesus heals our sickness, and we gratefully march off into flourishing. I once was blind, but now I see; I once was sick, but now I'm all patched up. Praise Jesus!"

But just as we don't cease to become sinners once we encounter Jesus, we all, at least on some level, remain sick people in need of the Divine Physician.

We cannot save ourselves from our sin and we cannot heal ourselves from our disease. God alone can ultimately treat our deepest wounds.

As I mentioned, both of the young men whose funerals I attended this week were committed Christians. They were also clearly carrying sins and sorrows that felt impossible.

Two deep things can be true at the same time.

I believe that even in the final moments of these young men's lives, when they couldn't see a way forward, when they took that final, terrible step, God was not far from them.

The one in whom they live and move and have their being was there. His heart was breaking. He was pleading with them not to do it. But he also understood what they were carrying in a way that no one else did or does.

Psalm 34:8 declares that “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

I believe that God is close. And that God does save.

In the end, the deep hope of the gospel is that God’s mercy is bigger than our sin and this is true even in the deepest, darkest despair.

And of course, that on the cross and in an empty tomb, God, in Christ, has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He has taken the sin of the world upon himself. He has absorbed our sickness into himself. And by his wounds, we are healed.

This is the deep truth of the gospel. And for this we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.



Both funerals I attended this week had passionate pleas for those who might be struggling with depression or feelings of hopelessness and despair to seek help. Talk to a trusted friend. Reach out.

I would say the same to anyone here this morning or who may watch online who might be going through a difficult season. Even when every instinct may be to turn inward, take the courageous step of reaching out. To a trusted friend, to someone in the church, to a parent, a grandparent, a friend, a pastor. To God! You are not alone, no matter how it may feel at any given moment. There is a light that shines, even in the darkest darkness.

Instead of singing a song in response to the sermon today, we’re going to listen to one. It’s a song that came into my headphones this week while I was writing this sermon and thinking about these two funerals.

It’s by Jon Guerra and is called The One We’re Looking For. The lyrics are printed in your bulletins. For me, the song encapsulates many of the themes of our text this morning and the hope that we have for all who fumble Godward.

As we listen, I invite you to pray, reflect, think about the people in our lives who we might check in on, and think about your own pursuit of the God you were made for.