

Sixth Sunday of Easter, 5/21/17

## “EXTREME RELIGION”

Acts 17:22-31, Ps. 66:8-20, Jn. 14:15-21

A story in our local paper in Hunterdon County, NJ. informed me that a young man of 30 whom I held in my arms and baptized, who once asked his father if I was God when I walked into the sanctuary in my black robe (His father answered, "No, he just dresses like him."), made such a racket at a candlelight service, that the next year my session introduced an early "family" service on Christmas eve. He won a silver medal in speed skating at the last Olympics in Russia, was banned from competition for two years for testing positive to a banned performance enhancing drug between competitions.

I was surprised and initially upset. It seems that in the effort to be the best or to just compete

2. at the international level in sports, athletes feel the need to enhance their "natural" strength through chemicals. They take shots and pills, blood transfusions and hormones, along with work out routines that border on masochism.

I call this, Extreme Sports! It is consistent with human behavior since the beginning of recorded history, and I believe before that. We harbor a desire to be powerful, or as it is stated so eloquently in Genesis by the serpent, "when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you **WILL BE LIKE GOD.**"

To be like God, does not mean growing into the full stature of the image of God in which we have been created. It means that we believe that we can **BE GOD.** We think that we can, by knowing good and evil, control its impulses in ourselves and others. Just as we think that by

3. taking certain chemicals that we can rise to the top of our field and be recognized as "godlike."

We desire, not so much to worship God as to be worshipped, "LIKE GOD." The reason I say this, is because the essence of worship is OBEDIENCE! Just as Adam and Eve were warned that disobedience to God's command would result in death, so we are, not so much warned as invited to LOVE JESUS and keep his commandments. Jesus said to his disciples in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Thus, obedience to Jesus is to keep his commandments, which are grounded in Love of God and love of neighbor and love of Jesus and love of self. And the center of love is FORGIVENESS.

4. This is where everything seems to break down in human relationships, and in our own personal piety (personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ). Because forgiveness is the most vulnerable of willful expressions. It opens us to the fearful admission that we have less than perfect control of life. And as I said earlier, all of us have a human desire to power, that must be relinquished in order to forgive.

We practice something that I have chosen to call EXTREME RELIGION. It is informed by St. Paul in his description of the Athenian's extreme religion when he referred to their altar to "AN UNKNOWN GOD". They were making sure that in their pantheistic approach to worship that they wouldn't forget a god and suffer the consequences of its wrath. They hedged their bets, much like the athletes who use performance enhancing drugs. The Athenians were brilliant philosophers, but they

5. wanted to be PERFECT, NUMERO UNO, TOP DOGS. Their chief sin was "hubris", and they strove to avoid this by their worship of an unknown god. (Hubris = excessive pride, arrogance).

Paul informed them that the god unknown to them was unlike any of those they worshipped. God is the creator, but is not physical; God is a Spirit that cannot be identified by idols or worshipped by sacrifices at altars, because God does not need that from us. ("God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things." Acts 17:25). What God desires of us is to return God's love by loving one another.

But, because of the way we have interpreted scripture, we feel that being perfect is the way we earn God's love, because it is the only way that we seem to be able to accept ourselves. I've noticed that the only way any of us can

6. achieve perfection is to make sure that we are just a little bit better than someone else.

My graduating class had as it's valedictorian a friend whom I thought would come in second to Martin S. I was in class with Martin in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and was totally impressed with his intellect. But the deciding factor was not that they both had all "A's", but that my friend had taken one more class than Martin. That's extreme learning!

Thus, we take one more shot of a female hormone to enhance our testosterone so that we can work out harder and therefore skate faster. We NEED to be just a little bit better than someone else. WHY?

It is our nature. But it is also our nature to, as Paul states, "To search for God, and perhaps grope for him and find him -though indeed he is not far from each one of us." Acts 17: 27

7. The world resists obedience to God and as Jesus says, "This is the Spirit of Truth, whom, the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him" Jn. 14:17

The unknown God of the Athenians is Jesus and is trusted only because the Holy Spirit is given to anyone of us who dares to believe. The importance of the Holy Spirit is that we humans are not left to struggle and keep the commandments of Jesus alone. Indeed, we cannot, left on our own, as good as we are, as smart as we are, and as strong as we are, even HOPE to keep the commandments. We need help, and lots of it!

It is the world that seeks EXTREME RELIGION, along with extreme everything else in an effort to quench its seemingly insatiable thirst for power. Power is smoke and mirrors. The only true power is found in loving Jesus and that means giving up the power that the world

8. worships and accepting the love of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that will assuage the fear of powerlessness.

WWJD? Was an acronym found on bracelets years ago. "What would Jesus do?" Was a question we were urged to ask whenever we needed to make a decision. Today's scripture hints at another acronym; IYLM (If you love me) I'm not opposed to the first, and I think the second enlightens the first. When faced with how you need to react to a threatening situation, try listening to the Holy Spirit within you; "If you love me." And remember that you don't have to feel love for the other, you need only to LOVE THE OTHER, with the love of Jesus Christ that lives in you through the Advocate (Holy Spirit).

You don't need EXTREME RELIGION, because what you have in Jesus Christ is more extreme

9. than anything the world can come up with. It just doesn't know it!

Peace.