

Acts 17:22-28

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For 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. The 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, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From 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, so 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. For “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.”

John 13:12-17

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

“The Affliction of Faith”
(Reflections on Diana Eck)
Rev. Charles Schuster
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A veterinarian. A woman brought in puppies. It was a litter of seven puppies, golden retriever puppies brought in for shots and worming, and they all looked alike, squirming over and under each other in a box. It was difficult to tell which one had been treated and which one hadn't, so the veterinarian turned to the spigot, the water, wet his fingers, moistened the head of each dog when he finished it, and after the fourth or fifth puppy, the owner of the pups became quiet. As he put water on the head of the last puppy, the woman looked at the vet and said, "I didn't know they had to be baptized."

Rich Limberg is a Presbyterian and he's a pastor, and how did he become a Presbyterian? He said he became a Presbyterian by earthquake. His grandmother was a Baptist, she moved her family from Iowa to California years ago, a Presbyterian minister visited her and invited her to come to the church, the Presbyterian church. She said, "I'm a Baptist, it would take an act of God to make me change." While they were visiting, an earthquake shook the house. Being from Iowa, she never experienced that, so she didn't know what it was, but when it was over, she told the pastor, "I'll join."

At some time, for whatever reason, many of us, maybe most of us, have been baptized. Many of us, most of us, have said, "I'll join," but what does it mean? I think it means many things. I'm going to cite only two. I am adapting something I read that Arthur Gordon wrote. These two words are not original with me. The points are, but the words

aren't, in fact he used the words in a different way. What does it mean to be in the church, or a Christian? What does it mean to be a United Methodist? First of all, and I think this is most important, it means, and this is Gordon's word, wam. Wam. W-A-M. It means, "what about me?" It's personal. Being in the church means being in a mainstream. We are part of something.

I've been reading some of what Diana Eck has to say about the Christian faith. We ought to be interested in Diana Eck. One of our church members' sister was her Sunday School teacher. She grew up in the oldest United Methodist church in Montana. She is a world-famous theologian. She teaches at Harvard. She has written several books. She has traveled all over the world, and has given lectures in some of the most prestigious schools in the world. I wrote her this week. I told her I was going to preach a sermon on her theology. She wrote me back. She pointed to her book, *Encountering God*, which is in our church library, and will be back soon. I have it. She talks about her formative years. "The foundation stone of my church," she says, "was laid in 1973." First pastor of the church was named Iliff, for whom the school, Iliff School of Theology, is named. Back in those days, Bozeman, Montana was a frontier town, had dirt streets. She talks about her own experience in the youth group. She said, "I got an idea of the wide and vibrant sense of the church, growing up in that church. Our youth group enacted rituals of bonding and commitment. We confessed our secrets and shared our dreams and sang and sat in silence and prayed." It is obvious, WAM, her church was WAM, her church was an answer to the question, "What about me?" It was all about her. She belonged, part of a mainstream, part of something big.

I've listened to the people here at First Church. I hear your stories. The move from College to Stover Street, I know there was a big history, long history, prior to that. Henry Baker, who had a deep belly laugh and a deep voice, who stood so tall and loomed so large, this is his pulpit. It's been cut down twice since he stood in it. And Del Paulson, his guitar-picking playing and Bob Hamilton and his trips so many places, some of you all went with him, his sermons intellectual and good. Jim Cowell, the Southern soft speak of the Southern from Tennessee, Jim Cowell, and Carol Fox, the day she was supposed to preach in the church and the custodian didn't show up and the other ministers were away and she didn't have a key and she had to crawl in a window in order to open up the church so you could have services. And Joel Kershaw, who was on one of those mission trips like Meg has just come back, and he told us how he was pulled over in Texas with the church van full of kids driving too fast. The day the voted to buy the Marcussen organ that's behind me there, the vote was taken, barely passed. Concern about whether they could pay for it, the pledges were brought in, they had it all covered, there was no debt on this organ. And none of the pledges, the gifts, were particularly big. It was just a lot of little gifts that added up, to enable us to have this magnificent instrument. The day we borrowed the Moravian star for the Christmas Eve service and suspended it high above the choir loft. We continued to do that, we've continued to have that multi-pointed, brightly lit star suspended high above us, you know, and the year during the Christmas Eve services when the lights were dimmed and the congregation, I'm told, was singing some kind of Christmas carol, it was soft, and a beautiful thing, and it dropped. It was a shooting star. It was a worship service no-one would forget. Ten years, fifteen years ago I

guess it happened. WAM we belong to that, it's the mainstream, we're part of something big. It's about me.

Wednesday evening, this past Wednesday, I had a discussion here at the church on a book written by Deborah Tannin. It's about men and women and how they don't understand each other. We had a large crowd. Meg and I actually did the class, separated the group, men on one side and women on the other. We talked about the differences. We talked about how women need to know they're liked, and men, on the other hand, need to know they're respected. How it is that men challenge authority and how women try to work with it, manipulate it. How men are concerned about status and independence and how women are concerned about connection and interdependence, how men like to hide their feeling and why we do it, and how women like to share their feelings and why you do it. And Tannin said there are some differences. One of them is, women faint. Women faint. Men pass out. Later this week three women pointed this out to me. Houston Street, a pitcher for the Rockies, this week before a game, on Thursday night I think, the teams were taking batting practice and someone hit a baseball that struck him in the lower abdomen. He was taken to the hospital. He is fine. But three women in this church, in that class, came into my office and said, "You know how you said women faint, but men pass out, Chuck? Did you notice what they said about Houston Street? He fainted. Fainted." I said, "Maybe he's a woman."

I divided the class on Wednesday between men and women to emphasize our differences, and one of the things that kept fighting back at me from that group was, yeah we are different, but there's the feminine side of men and the masculine side of women, and we in many ways are different, but in many ways we are one, in faith, in Christ, in a lot of different ways. The reason we have communion is WAM, what about me, we belong to the mainstream, we are part of something big. I'm reminded of the time Jesus sat down with his friends at a meal and he said, "You belong to me," in effect, "I belong to you," but he did it with the bread and the cup and the sense of belonging, and there are other signs all over this place, the sign of the fish or the cross or the trinity, it's all over this room, reminding us that we're part of something, that what's here is important, and we're part of what's important. We are Christian, we are United Methodists, and when we walk into this place, we know we belong. We are part of a congregation of people, and that group has a history, but it also has a future. We want a sense of belonging. It begins with the table, with the communion elements. It's blood, it's body, those are the words. Some argue that it's transubstantiation, that the blood and body is his, actually. We argue that it's consubstantiation, it's a symbol of the blood and body, and then we go on to say it's really the DNA of the church of Christ, the body of Christ in us, and we're part of that. WAM, what about us. It's about us. We're part of something big, a mainstream. We belong.

Secondly, what about you? The Christian faith is more than "What about me?" WAY - what about you? The Christian faith takes in the margins as well as the mainstream. Invites us to look to those who are part of something else, while we realize we're part of something big. Fred Craddock preached at a church in Atlanta, four sessions, this homiletics professor from Candler School of Theology, big church, big crowd, he said

"more than I'm used to." In all four of the services, before they kind of got into the service itself, the minister stood up and said, "We're going to have a few moments of fellowship, greet each other in Christian love, all this Fred said, all this hugging and kissing and carrying on with people going across the room and up and down the aisle, grabbing each other and hugging, and somebody came up to Fred and kissed him on the mouth. "It was something," he said, "and then we got on to worship." Four nights of that. The last night, Fred and Nettie, his wife, and the pastor of the church went out for coffee, and the pastor said to them, "Did you ever see such a family church? Did you ever see such a loving group of people in all your life?" and Nettie said, "Well, yeah I have." The pastor said, "What do you mean?" She said, "I was there for all four services. I was there for all four services, nobody spoke to me." There was a long pause, and the pastor of the friendly, loving church said, "Well, that was because they didn't know who you were."

If Jesus is the way, WAY, then his followers understand, ask "What about you?" It's not just about belonging, it's also about beloving. In fact, to belong is to belove. It was one of the acts Jesus performed and only one Gospel writer caught it, it never became a sacrament, but it was never forgotten. He took a towel, in John's Gospel only, he washed their feet, and told them to do the same. Not to each other only, as they were part of something big, but to others who were part of something else. When Paul was in Athens, he looked at the statues and symbols and he saw the statue to an unknown god, and he said, "I see that you're very religious." He honored their faith, he didn't criticize it or critique it. "I see that you're very religious," and he said, "The god you call the unknown god, that is the God we worship."

Diana Eck thought about it, she said, "Is our God the same as their god? The question does not occur to me. I simply take it for granted. It's what allows me to feel natural entering a prayer service with my Muslim friends. Some call God Allah. Some call God Vishnu. Some call God Yahweh. We are not all the same, yet trying to understand the differences is the great human challenge, and we are linked and interdependent." Diana Eck has come to think one of the worst things we Christians can do is to see ourselves as the custodians of exclusive truth. She has developed a theology which she calls the theology of pluralism, in which she sees harmony and difference in the harmony, but harmony, seeking to find what we hold in common. Look at the margins. WAY - what about you?

Last weekend I had a wedding in the mountains between Breckenridge and Frisco, up on a place called Sapphire Point. It is a spectacular setting. I get married again, that's where it's gonna be. I'm up there visiting with a string quartet, that's four women from CSU, the smallest one's carrying the cello. Why is it small people play the big instruments? I don't understand that. And then you've got these rodents with stripes running around, chirping like Alvin and people feeding them. It was disgusting. And there was this couple, not the couple I was going to marry, but there was this couple and my couple hadn't gotten there yet, he was fifty, I'm guessing, she was, I don't know, it's hard to tell. Her hair was not gray like his was, it's possible it could have been chemically modified. But he said something to her about what a wonderful first date this had been, and she looked at me in my black suit and it's ninety degrees, and she said, "What do you do?" I said "I'm a

preacher, you want a sermon?" and she said, "Seriously, are you here for a wedding?" and I said, "You got it." And she said, "Do you want to do another one?" And that's when he turned a little pale, and began walking up the hill in a rigid clip that could have been described as a sprint.

Do we put up rules that keep people out, or do we open our doors and let people in? Are we accessible, or are we intimidating? Do we attract, or do we repel? Will we judge to the point no one will hear us and our invitation, or will we be curious to the point that we are prepared to hear the cries for help and learn from the wisdom of those who are outside us? A young man who is working looks around the building and says to one of our members, "You know, I really like what I see here. What's a Methodist?" A young woman who finds meaning in the Crosswalk service asks, "Can I join the church?" A young couple with little children walk into the empty sanctuary last Sunday looking for someone, and then somebody asks the five-year-old, "Would you like to turn on the lights?"

A church looks outside itself. What about you, who stand beyond our walls? What about you, who look at us and wonder, would you do another wedding? Would you baptize my child? Would you welcome me even if you don't know who I am? Christian people of faith who look at the margins, like when the Ethiopian eunuch asked Stephen what is to keep him from being baptized into the Christian faith, and he found himself in hot water and was dunked by the time the sun went down. When they told Jesus there were people who were preaching in his name but didn't have the authority to do it, do you know what he said? He said "Those who are not against us are for us." Christian people are interested in what goes on outside the walls as they are interested in what goes on inside. Christian people have no interest in finding enemies, but finding strangers who can become friends. It's not about protecting ourselves. It's about immersing ourselves.

At a funeral service Friday we celebrated the life of Dr. Tom Norrie, who had been on a hospital ship in the Vietnam war. At his service there was a military color guard. The leader of the color guard at the funeral for a man who tried to save lives of soldiers and civilians in Vietnam, the leader of the color guard from the Colorado National Guard, the leader of the color guard was Vietnamese. It's that kind of world, today. Call God what you will. Make it specific. Honor it by name. Worship it as true. Seek to learn more about God than we know. Strive to hear God's word from all places and people. Struggle as we will to find God's will for us and for all of us, and forever. We find it here, but we find it there. We care about the outcast and the outlaw. We care about people with whom we don't see eye to eye, and then we stand toe-to-toe until we're heart-to-heart, until some of our soulmates were once former adversaries, because we don't need to convert the world to Christ since we are converted to Christ, we just act like he would act, to see God in every part of the world, and to see God in every person we meet. WAM WAY. Holy ground is not private turf, it's common space. It may have happened already, it may be pending, but soon to be. A question asked, a silence followed in the recesses of time and space a quiet pondering of eternal wisdom, but a voice is heard, an answer is given. A question that comes is about the imperative of conversion. The answer from the God of

all Gods, the creator of heaven and earth, who is heard to have said, "I didn't think they all need to be baptized." But they're all invited to the table.