

Sermon for Sunday, August 21, 2022
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Traveling With the Spirit
“In God We Live and Move and Have Our Being”
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[Acts 17:22-31](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Paul says, in God we live and move and have our being. Really? Those words are so beautiful and poetic, yet they often don't describe my lived experience. How about you?

Mostly, I experience living in the United States, being in Decorah, moving around Iowa and the Midwest. Those places are where I live and move and have my being. Usually, I'm not conscious of how much I'm shaped by them. Often it takes travel away from these places to see it.

When I go to Minneapolis, I still look at the passing cars assuming I will know people in them, like I do here. I do not. When I traveled in New York, I realized Midwesterners really want strangers to have a nice day and New Yorkers do not share this concern. Twenty some years ago when I lived in Zimbabwe and Tanzania, I was surprised when people asked if life in the US was unsafe because of all the gun violence. I felt very safe here until I considered things from someone else's perspective.

Often, we're unaware of the forces that so powerfully impact our lives. This is especially true about the deepest reality, the most central truth. We really do live and move and have our being in God. Yet since this is all that we've ever known, all that we've ever experienced, we often can't see it. We live unaware of this profound good news about our lives.

I'm reminded of a story told by author David Foster Wallace in a graduation speech at Kenyon College. "There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" As Wallace puts it, "The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about ..."

The most true thing about you and me is that we are in God always. As we move through our days, as we travel through this world, we are held in God's love always, surrounded by God's presence in every way, in all things. This is what is most true about us. It isn't where we are from or what we achieve, think, or believe. What matters most is that we are in God always. This isn't something we have to do or earn, we don't get to live in God if we're good enough. This is just a given reality.

As we start a new school year, as we show up for our lives day in and day out, as we navigate health challenges and family tensions and political upheaval, we are always, always held in God. God is the water in which we swim, the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand. God is how we are alive, why we move, the source of our being in every moment.

It is such good news, yet it is so hard to see. As David Foster Wallace put it in that speech, “The capital-T Truth is everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over.” This is what we do as people of God. Together, we become more aware of God’s presence. We remind each other that we belong to God, that we live in God. What helps you to be aware of this? How do you help others to remember?

During my sabbatical I got to spend some time with Sr. Nancy, a healing touch therapist at Prairie-woods Spirituality Center in Cedar Rapids. After she prayed over me, she told me to go take a walk in the woods. She said, “You know the trees are an important way that God loves us.” Ever since then, I’ve been imagining what God is saying to me through the trees. Sometimes I feel like the trees are reaching out with a wave or even a hug. (Yes, your pastor is officially a tree hugger.) Sometimes trees remind me to be quiet and grounded, still other times they help me to just delight in beauty and remember that God delights in us. In the fall they remind me to surrender, let go, and trust.

Last week, when I was in Columbus, Ohio, as a voting member at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I hardly saw trees. We spent our days in the convention center. The view outside my hotel room was just one large hotel after another. I was reminded then of how often we crowd out an awareness of God’s presence and of how many people live each day in environments that are starved of beauty, nature, and peace. This awareness gave me the passion and drive I needed to testify on the assembly floor about the importance of caring for God’s creation.

Even when we aren’t aware, God cannot be stopped from loving and holding us. God raises the dead, God is always working to bring new life as our reading from Acts proclaims.

What helps you know God’s presence?

What reminds you of the loving water in which you swim, the centering ground on which you stand, the life-giving air you breathe?

How are you called to help others know of this presence?

You belong to God.

You live in God.

May you know this deep in your bones.

May you help others to know.