

August 14, 2011  
 Acts 17:16-34  
 “Jeff Carlson is a Grandpa; God is Not”  
 Rev. Pat Weatherwax

I think we often, in our imagination, see God like one of “the Founding Fathers, grave and gray haired.” The old man upstairs. But God is not an old man. God is not your grandpa. Pastor Jeff is a Grandpa, but God is not.

When Paul was in his early travels he went to Athens, the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world at its time. Maybe like how some describe the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Arts, culture and knowledge all in one place. The citizens there in Athens were known for their delight in learning, their tolerance of differing ideas and their logical reasoning. They covered their religious bases; they even had an altar for the God they didn't know. Paul felt moved to tell them that the God they didn't know was the one that had made them and everything around them. In a sermon that is still one of the best ever, Paul laid it out for them:

**God is not:**

- unknown or unknowable (v. 23). The people in Paul's day were very aware of what's called “Natural theology”- believing in God or gods because creation is SO amazing. But God wants to be known personally, not because our changing seasons with fresh summer fruit are lovely, but because God is in a one on one relationship with you.
- bound in a shrine made by hands (v. 24). Or only found to be found in our church buildings. This is not the only place God is!
- dependant on people for anything (v. 25). God doesn't need us, but God wants us. The Westminster Confession, a principal document of our reformed theology, explains that our “**chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.**”
- an image (29), including any image we hold in our minds about the “man upstairs”.

How does literature or art usually depict God? Often the image is an old white man with gray hair and a beard, sitting on a throne or pitching lightning down onto the earth. Some of us picture God that way. Some of us had grandpas that seemed like that. Dr. Carlson is a grandpa, probably will be a doting, wrapped around that little girl's finger grandpa. God is not a grandpa.

Maybe we aren't so different from the people listening to Paul. They were at Areopagus, which was the Greek name for the place that the Romans would call “Mars Hill”. Ares in Greek or Mars in Latin was a well-known god of the culture. The god of war; but a god limited and often defeated in battle. They had a mental image because they had stories and art work that depicted what their god looked like. But Ares was one of many gods.

Our God is ONE. The first commandment.

Our God, as Paul was trying to describe, is significantly different from the gods of that time and place, but some of *our* images of God are also called into question by applying Paul's sermon. Anyone of these can be transforming if you consider your own spiritual awareness. **God is also not:**

- removed from us (v. 28). The Message translation says: "We live and move in him, can't get away from him." Paul was encouraging his audience to look for God, that God was near to us all, no matter what was happening.
- subject to human terms or descriptors (v. 29) God's not made clearer by our artistic images or our imagination. That limits us and in our minds it limits God.
- blind to our ignorance and unrighteousness (v. 31). Even when we don't understand how it all works, we believe that God DOES have authority over life and death, will judge us someday. Thankfully, God's authority includes God's mercy, peace, love and grace.

This is good, because of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead, Paul says, gives us assurance, that we are loved. The perfect human Jesus is the judge who is most worthy to judge us, but will declare us right with God. Romans 8:34: "Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

Maybe your grandfather was physically and emotionally distant or maybe he was your dearest and nearest source of comfort. Maybe he was easy or difficult to love. Maybe you had one of each. Maybe in grandpa's eyes you could do no wrong or you were a big bother. I haven't had a grandpa for over 40 years. I most remember that my grandfather carried pink peppermints in his suit coat pocket. Sometimes they came to me with a little lint. He was nice. But God is not your grandpa.

Because God is so much more for us than the "old man upstairs." God is not anyone's Grandpa. Paul tried to explain that to the people in Athens, people who always wanted to be learning new things. They knew one of their own scholars had said "We are God's offspring." Paul reminded them. I remind you.

God is the one who "knit us together in our mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). We answer to "Our Father, who art in heaven," not our grandpa. For so many more reasons, God is not a grandpa-like being. Because:

God doesn't want anything to come between us. God doesn't count you as just another grandchild; God counts you as beloved son or daughter. God doesn't love you because your parents are, or were good people, or because you were baptized or confirmed in the church. God doesn't love you because your parents have a personal relationship and are Christ followers. Back to Romans 8. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." Not even a generation.

God doesn't want stereotypes or personal struggles with human relationships to come between us, either. God is *more than* grandfather or father. I loved my father and I know he loved me, but when I needed him growing up, he was already gone. The "God as father" image didn't give me comfort since my daddy wasn't there for me. I usually don't use paternal images for God because many people do not feel secure and loved when they hear the word father.

A book I've mentioned before, a favorite of mine: "Re-imagining God: The Case for Scriptural Diversity" by Dr. Johanna van Wijk-Bos. She was a long time Professor at Louisville Pres. Theological Seminary. Bos is my maiden name; I wish I could claim to be related to her.

Dr. Bos suggests that we use a different format when trying to describe God using any human or earthly metaphor. Use: "Yes, No, More So." Yes, God is like a father or grandfather, loving and caring. *No*, God is not like a father or grandfather - for humans are very flawed beings. God is *more so*. More than the best father, more than the most doting grandfather. God is more than we can imagine or describe. More than the old man upstairs, more like the always refreshing source our soul's existence.

Now maybe some of you grandparents understand full well what I am saying. You wish your children and grandchildren had the faith relationship with God that you have. Maybe you youth get it. It's between you and God, and yet there are many friends who you hope find faith soon, before they self-destruct. I say something that Jesus said a lot: "Don't be afraid." Someone told me it's in the Bible 365 times, but I haven't verified that yet. Don't be afraid; God loves all children, young and old, believing, seeking and scoffing.

See, after Paul's sermon about the knowable God and about Jesus' resurrection from the tomb, some "scoffed." Some said "we want to hear about this again, sometime." Others got it, then and there. They became followers; they believed that Jesus had the gift of life and that Jesus overcame the grave to prove power, authority, amazing grace and love. God knows when the time is right. God has a plan and we are part of it.

This is the closest thing I will ever give to an altar call. God wants to be in a relationship with you. God wants you to be his child. God is best loved on a one-on-one basis. It's not about what anyone else believes or practices. It's about the amazing love of God for you, and the hope that comes when you know that you don't walk alone.  
Let's pray.

God you are my grand-parent, my friend, guide and guard. I want nothing to come between us. I love you and am open to your amazing love and grace. AMEN