

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, May 12, 2023

6 Easter, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 17:22-31](#)

[Psalm 66:7-18](#)

[1 Peter 3:13-22](#)

[John 14:15-21](#)

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Paul was in Athens, the ancient center of Greek learning and public life. His travels planting churches and spreading the good news of Jesus had taken him from Jerusalem through Syria and all the way across Asia Minor, what we now call Turkey, into Greece, and now to the great city, the home of the philosophers.

He started, the scripture passage from Acts tells us, by looking around the city; looking closely. Being attentive to what he saw and what he could glean from it about the life of the people. He looked at the shrines and altars he saw, including one inscribed, most provocatively, “To an Unknown God.” He intuited something about the yearnings of the people of that place, yearnings to know and understand more about the universe and the meaning behind it all. And from that attentiveness, he found the place where the good news he carried intersected with the needs of those people and that city. And then he preached the good news of God’s love in Jesus.

This week is a time called Rogation Week, or Rogationtide. It's an old name that comes from a word that simply means "asking"; a time to ask God's blessing on a place, a locality; a parish, in the oldest sense of the word, meaning a geographical area that a church community is embedded in and in some way responsible for. It's one of those traditions that seems to go back before Christianity, a custom from pagan religion. Like Paul in Athens, the early Christians found the intersection between that tradition and their new faith, and they continued it, praying not just to one god among many but to the One God of heaven and earth. In the week leading up to Ascension Day, they prayed for fields and crops, for people and animals, for safe growth and good harvests, for the health and welfare of the place.

In medieval England it became the custom to go on a long procession on the Rogation days, to visit the four corners of the boundaries of the parish; because in England, and still to this day, a parish isn't just the congregation you happen to like best and decide to drive to to go worship. A parish is something irresistibly local, a marked-out geographical area with borders. So on the days of Rogationtide the congregation would leave the church and go on a big procession with banners and torches to "beat the bounds," as it was called.

Today we are invited to beat the bounds of our own parish. Not that we have legal borders and clear boundaries. But we as a congregation are embedded in a local community, or perhaps a series of nested communities. Our members and friends come here from all over Sonoma County, mostly from Santa Rosa but also from Healdsburg and Windsor and Rohnert Park, from east on Highway 12 toward Kenwood and west along the Russian River to Forestville and Guerneville and beyond. So we have a broad geography of much of our county.

But we also worship right here on this corner of Mendocino Avenue and Tenth Street, a few blocks north of Old Courthouse Square, a downtown church with a special relationship to our downtown neighborhood. It's a relationship we cherish, a relationship our spiritual forebears chose to maintain and invest in rather than move elsewhere, as was considered for a while back in the fifties and sixties. And today is a good day for us, like Paul in the city of Athens, to look at our city, at our downtown neighborhood, and be attentive; to look with eyes that are curious, eyes that are loving, eyes that wonder where God is at work and has long been at work long before we ever noticed, eyes that wonder where we might join in.

Today after the 10:15 service Deacon Phina Borgeson will be leading a prayer walk of about a mile, from here down to Santa Rosa Creek and back. In our bulletins today is a handout with a map and directions so that you can do either this one-mile walk or a longer, three-mile version, on your own or with others, any time you might choose to, in the next week or so. I hope many of us will choose to walk, today or another day. And as you do, you're invited to pray for the people and places you see. And as one form of prayer, you're invited also to take photos of what you see around you that piques your imagination, and to share those photos using a link in the handout so we can build a neighborhood slide show together. (Please ask permission before taking any pictures of people, of course.)

What will spark your imagination? Maybe it will be the natural environment in which we are nestled, the watershed of Santa Rosa Creek, the hills that surround us, the trees, the land stewarded for millennia by Pomo peoples and others before the coming of European settlers. Maybe it will be the urban fabric, the square with the multiple iterations of its design through the years, the grid of streets, the transportation system, the buses and SMART trains.

Maybe it will be City Hall, the arena of decision-making and negotiations aimed at brokering power and perhaps even serving the common good. Maybe it will be businesses and restaurants, people coming and going, lingering and talking. Maybe it will be the juxtaposition of poverty and possessions, those without homes and those nursing artisanal cocktails, underpasses and shopping malls. Maybe it will be the cultural life of this city, performance spaces, theaters and lounges, places for art and creativity where the longings of the human spirit find a voice. Maybe it will be places of learning, Luther Burbank School and Santa Rosa Middle School and the Sonoma County Public Library, places where there is growth in understanding. Maybe it will be the faith communities around us, our Muslim and Unitarian and Orthodox and evangelical neighbors who join with us in praying for our community in different keys.

Today we pray for our neighborhood and for the land and for the living things of this place. Maybe the prayers we offer today will bear fruit in ways we do not yet know, in new ministry possibilities, new collaborations and ways to serve, in ideas for the future of our campus as we continue our property redevelopment process of Imagine Incarnation this fall. Maybe they will just enrich our own devotion and meditations as we give thanks for God's creativity and pray for the well-being of all. Who knows?

May we be attentive, like Paul. May we listen, and look, and wonder, and learn. And may we also, as Paul did, find the places where the good news we carry intersects with the needs of the people and the city around us, and in our own way share the good news of the love of God in Jesus.