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Pilgrim United Church of Christ
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2017

Scripture: [Acts 17:22-28](#) and [John 14:15-21](#)

As some of you know, our Confirmation Class is going to visit our Hindu neighbors later this afternoon. I am really excited... to be going to a worship service where I don't have to do anything. I get to sit in sacred space and not worry about ushers or readers who aren't here yet or how to summarize a two minute prayer request into one sentence or why our microphones are so evil.

I am really looking forward to it.

Before I went to India a few years ago, I didn't really know anything about Hinduism. (I didn't know about *the UCC* until graduate school.) Honestly, even after my time in India, there is so much I do not understand. But I do have a much deeper appreciation for the faith tradition and community after being a close witness, and welcomed guest, in their midst.

(I've also gotten in trouble with temple authorities for accidentally entering a special place we were not supposed to be in, but that's another story.)

The point is I have encountered God in Hindu spaces and people.

The Hindu temples I visited tended to be aesthetically fascinating, their exteriors bearing hundreds of brightly colored representations of various gods. Inside, people lit candles, twirled, kissed the ground. In the halls of some of the larger temples, families and groups ate and socialized. There were rituals I didn't recognize, statues and sculptures that were unfamiliar.

When I read about Paul in Athens, looking carefully at various objects of worship, I have flashbacks to my time in India and I can understand his need to reframe, to reconnect the disparate dots in ways that make sense to his experience of Jesus and understanding of God.

In India, I, too, felt like I was experiencing an unknown god. I did not feel compelled to debate everyone around me, as Paul is quick to do. At least Athens was an environment where such debate was eagerly accepted. Just before the passage we read today, Luke (the traditionally attributed author of Acts) tells us that the local philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Luke adds: “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.”

It’s unclear whether Paul is standing in front of the geographical Areopagus, the rock hill northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, *or* if he has been brought before the Council of the Areopagus, the chief Roman court. Either way, he continues speaking the language of his audience -- adopting Stoic and Epicurian philosophic discourse -- as he does throughout his time in Athens and in his prior travels. (Remember in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes that he has become all things to all people in order to help people hear his message? Obviously President Trump was reading *One* Corinthians, not *Two* Corinthians when preparing for his campaign last year.)

Paul’s message before the Areopagus is that God is neither unknown nor far away, nor does God inhabit lifeless objects; God inhabits *us*. Echoing Greek wisdom, Paul offers one of my favorite lines in all of scripture: *In God we live and move and have our being*.

Two professors led my study abroad course in India: Michelle Voss Roberts, a theology professor at Wake Forest, and Thomas Thangaraj, a retired theology professor and former presbyter in the Church of South India. Thomas is a native of Nazareth, Tamil Nadu -- a small state in South India.

On our trip, Thomas explained that all of the statues in Hindu temples are representations of the One, reflecting the Hindu value of manyness. The value of manyness often tends to confound those of us from monotheistic faiths. Sometimes we are wary of Hinduism on the grounds that there is only one God, yet we, too, understand and celebrate that One in three manifestations -- Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit: the Trinity.

Thomas asked if perhaps in different places and times God has given people everywhere the opportunity to sense the Divine, even if in distinct and divergent ways.

Thomas' question reminds me of Paul's claim: *From one ancestor God 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 and find him--though indeed she is not far from each one of us. For 'In [God] we live and move and have our being.'*

And, turning that inside out, in us God lives and moves and has being.

Walking around Madurai, I frequently saw what looked like chalk drawings on the dirt fronts of homes and shops. In curious admiration, I tried not to step on them the way many children (and OCD adults) strategically avoid cracks in sidewalks. Their bursts of color decorating dirt soon became dust around ankles and animals, and the brilliant transformation made me smile. Though much more sophisticated, the designs reminded me of children's driveway drawings and, having no idea what they really were, I chalked them up to some kind of similar artistic play. It was not until New Year's Day, appropriately, that I watched one of these ground paintings unfold and began to understand their deep significance.

The drawings are called *kolams*. Local women were invited by our hosts to bless and sanctify the guest house where we stayed by creating a kolam on the ground near the entrance. Two women arrived mid-morning with bowls and cupped newspaper sheets of rice powder. With white powder, one drew two triangles -- one inside the other -- before they moved outward, together, creating leaf and circular patterns. Soon, a third woman joined. The intricate and beautiful process took over an hour, eventually becoming a huge lotus.

The lotus is a significant symbol seen everywhere, across religions and castes, in India. It is a plant that both comes out of and rests on top of water, but also repels water, so slick that drops of water fall right off. For Indians, the lotus represents being in the world but detached from it (sound familiar?). Although many kolams are drawn by making a grid of dots and connecting them to form a design, some are drawn entirely freehand, like the one I witnessed.

The three women worked together, silently, continuously, without speaking a word or skipping a beat, in seamless co-creation of this enormous work of dust-covered beauty. Bending, squatting, and circumventing for well over an hour, the trio painted lines and chose colors that fit together perfectly.

Whatever blessing is in the dirt is also in the hands and minds of these women, women who are full of spiritual and artistic creativity expressed in this single solidarity act. Kolams are a revelation of on the ground religious belief in motion and carried out by women. They signify the relationality not only among the ones who create them, but among our bodies and the spaces we inhabit, these inhabitations -- if not incarnations -- of the divine.

Not only in us does God live and move and have being. Not only in Christians. Not only in those of Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Not only do *we* -- however we define "we" -- search for and grope for and find God. All nations, those across all boundaries of time and space, search for *and find* God.

And I imagine divine breath, the wind of the Spirit, blowing over the seeds of a dandelion, being far flung across a field.

God is not far from each one. In God we live and move and have our being. In us God lives and moves and has being.

Looking carefully at objects, we may forget that. Looking carefully at subjects, living representations of God, we remember.

On our trip, Thomas concluded that he is "a better lover of Christ because of Hindus."

Our gospel reading today, from John, is framed by love. I know some of you are thinking, "*All this interfaith talk and nothing about the gospel?*" They're not two separate messages.

Our gospel lesson is a mirror of love: Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And God will give you an Advocate Spirit, who will abide in you. And I will be in you, and you will be in me. We will love each other.

And what are Jesus' commandments? To love God, and to love neighbor as ourselves. Easy to remember. Sometimes seemingly impossible to do. Of course Paul chimes in again in another letter: *In Christ all things are possible*. Ugh. Maybe if Paul quit debating everyone he wouldn't have spent so much time in prison writing all these annoying letters.

But back to the gospel lesson about dwelling in love... about being lovers of Christ, lovers of God, and lovers of one another.

Being lovers of God in each of our particular traditions is something Diana Eck explores at length in her spiritual autobiography and travel log, *Encountering God*. She explains how the experience of being in love, and talking about love, parallels the experience of faith:

The language of faith is the language of affection, of affirmation and commitments. It is . . . 'love language,' analogous to the language we use when we say to someone we love, 'You're the only one in the world for me.' It does not mean, 'I have systemically surveyed everyone in the world and have chosen you.' It means, simply and powerfully, 'I love you.' Faith requires the cherishing and deepening of commitment that is fundamental to any relationship. And the language of faith is the language of love, not of judgment. (95)

And so, as we say at the beginning of worship and perhaps should also say at the end, *we breathe in the breath of God, and breathe out the love of God.*

And we go from this place in God, living and moving and having our being -- and becoming. In us God goes from this place, living and moving and having being -- and becoming.

When we are tempted to forget, looking carefully at subjects of worship, living representations of God in the mirror and all around, may we remember. Amen.