

Getting Groped for God  
Acts 17:16-34  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached May 29, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

Ok, if I don't make mention of it, you're all going to be thinking about it anyway. So let's get our discomfort with the word groping out of our systems. We heard it in our passage, and it's there as part of the title of my sermon. In the era of heightened awareness of sexual harassment and assault, the word groping has received a rather unfortunate reputation, and God forbid any of you should be a victim of it. But you've all groped around for your alarm clock to turn it off while still in the dark. You've seen movies where someone gropes for the doorknob trying to escape a smoke-filled room. You know the kind of groping we'll be talking about. The word groping isn't really even a very good translation of the original Greek word in our passage from Acts, even if it does successfully impart the idea of searching around, perhaps vainly, in the darkness. The word is better translated as, and is frequently used to describe, feeling something or touching it. In fact, it is used by Jesus himself at the end of the Gospel of Luke when the disciples are having a bit of a hard time believing he has been raised from the dead and so he says to them, "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Grope me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Actually, it doesn't say, "Grobe me," but rather "Touch me," and so you can see the plainer meaning of the word. I don't want to belabor the point too

much, but the first letter of John begins by saying, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” You could even translate it as “taking hold of something.” So get your minds out of the gutter, people!

What the Apostle Paul is referring to with the word grope, or touch, is the human apprehension of God, the knowing of God, the experience of God. He is speaking to people who are willing to worship, or at least build an altar to, an unknown god, which doesn't really say too much for the gods that they supposedly already knew. Their gods are not generally the kind to be grasped, at least not in an authentic way. Maybe you remember the stories of some of those Greek gods, the kind who would hide their identity in order to trick their subjects and get what they wanted, that which they could not obtain for themselves without the help of mortals. These were gods who occasionally appeared to be human, for their own purposes, but who were only masquerading as human. It was to honor or placate these types of capricious gods that the citizens of Athens had built countless statues and altars and representations, so many that Paul found the experience of simply walking among the city a distressing one. That disturbance in his soul led him to debate in both the synagogue and the marketplace, and finally at the famous Aeropagus, Mars Hill, as it is frequently called. The Aeropagus was the place where philosophers and leaders of Athens gathered to debate the affairs of the day.

It probably served as the city council chambers as well as the clearinghouse for new ideas, and it was the novelty of what Paul was preaching that earned him his invitation. The idea of God becoming a real human being, and dying, and being raised from the dead was not the conversation about the divine that they were accustomed to hearing, and many mocked Paul, and so they brought him to the Mars Hill more to set him up to embarrass himself than to satisfy their intellectual curiosity.

Nevertheless, Paul makes the most of the situation and addresses this esteemed body of learned men, and subtly and skillfully lets them have it. He contrasts their many gods with his one God, their gods' dependence on human beings with his God's providence for human beings, their gods' distance with his God's closeness. "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 the nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existences 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 of us." Despite that last and wonderful claim of the nearness of God, it seems that few people that day understood the message, although some joined him.

It has frequently been noted that Paul gives two kinds of sermons in the book of Acts, one kind to the Jews in the synagogue and another kind to the Gentiles, at places like Mars Hill. It's the same message, of course, but offered in different ways for different audiences. In what we heard tonight, there is no recitation of the history of Israel and God's promises leading to the coming of the Messiah, and in fact there's no direct mention of Jesus Christ at all. Paul knows that not only do they worship unknown gods in Athens, but also that his God is unknown to them, and that he must start with the basics if they are to wrap their minds around the implications of what following the truly knowable God really means. He is trying to give some shape and texture to the God of Israel that goes beyond the shapes and textures of their images made of gold or silver or stone. That is why he quotes to them from their own poets rather than his own prophets, to let them know how close they are to reaching out and touching and knowing what was previously unknowable. God makes us, Paul is saying, not the other way around, and that makes all the difference in how we live our lives.

It has also been frequently noted just how much in common Paul's audience at the Aeropagus has with the world today, or at least the North American and European forms of it. Whereas once upon a time, virtually everyone in almost every corner of western society knew the story of Jesus, could recite the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, and had a vocabulary that included words like Trinitarian, transfiguration, and transubstantiation, that reality can no longer be

taken for granted, even in the church, much less the society at large. Just as Paul's preaching was derided as "babbling," because it was unknown, so now often is the story of the Christian faith considered babbling because fewer and fewer people know that story, and because those of us that do know it tend to tell it again and again as if there existed the same common vocabulary and worldview there once was. We preach Paul's message to the Jews to Paul's audience of the Gentiles. One of the most important things for us to learn from this sermon of Paul's in Athens is not what it says about God, but what it says about communicating God.

I am as guilty of this as anyone. I speak three languages: English, Spanish, and Presbyterian. I'd make a lousy evangelist, mainly because I don't speak the language. My vocabulary about Jesus has a lot, maybe too many, three and four syllable words, and although there's nothing in and of itself wrong with using big words, they aren't going to get me very far in giving shape and texture to Jesus Christ among those who do not speak the same religious language. And so I thank God that there is another way of communicating God that I can use even while I am in theological language school learning to speak a more appropriate language for my context. That new way is allowing myself to be groped for God. Get your minds out of the gutter, people!

You see, there is more than one way to learn something, a lesson both learned, and taught well, by Helen Keller. For those of you who may not remember her story, Helen Keller was born a perfectly healthy child in Alabama in the late

1800s, but lost both her sight and her hearing at the age of nineteen months after she contracted what was probably meningitis. From then, until she was seven years old, she lived in a dark and silent world in which she grew increasingly frustrated and angry for her inability to express herself. She made life miserable for her parents with her temper tantrums about which they could do virtually nothing. In a sense, both she and them were searching, groping, hoping to find a way to connect with one another, to know one another, to love one another, much like Paul describes the human search for the God who has made us, and who, he reminds us, has allotted the times of our existence and the boundaries of where would live. Those are the limits God has given us so that we might not go on searching endlessly in vain, neither for hundreds of years, nor to the ends of the earth, but instead, in recognizing that our time is not infinite, and our reach not inexhaustible, we might reach out our hands and try to grab hold of what really lasts, and know the unknowable.

When she was seven years old, Helen Keller received the gift of sight, not by what she could see with her eyes, but in the person of Anne Sullivan, who was to both teach her how to communicate, and to remain her lifelong friend and companion. You probably remember the story of how Anne would use her fingers to sign the letters of a word into one of Helen's hands, while her other hand would touch to object she was learning about. Their breakthrough came as Anne spelled the word water in one hand while Helen felt the rush of a stream in the other. And

that moment opened a floodgate for Helen, whose world opened up once again. There was no turning back from that moment, and Helen Keller embraced life with the same vigor as the vengeance she had inflicted upon her family. She went on to do marvelous things, becoming a world-renowned lecturer and teacher. I think she also has something to teach us tonight. This is what she wrote in one of her books: “I have walked with people whose eyes are full of light, but who see nothing in wood, sea, or sky, nothing in city streets, nothing in books. What a witless masquerade is this seeing!...When they look at things, they put their hands in their pockets. No doubt that is one reason why their knowledge is often so vague, inaccurate, and useless. We differ, blind and seeing, one from another, not in our senses, but in the use we make of them, in the imagination and courage with which we seek wisdom beyond our senses.”

Like those who heard Paul at the Aeropagus, not everyone will take their hands out of their pockets to touch and feel the world, and to receive the wisdom it has to offer. But, as we hear at the end of our story, “some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” There are those who are desperate to know the knowable God, if they but had something to lay their hands on to know it. Helen Keller had no words, but she had Anne Sullivan to grope, someone through whom she could experience the world more clearly than those with all their senses intact. This is what Paul is trying to say about Jesus Christ, that he is the way we know

God, he is what we take into our hands to understand love and grace and mercy and generosity. The contours of his life and his death and his resurrection give shape to our understanding of the God in whom “we live and move and have our being,” the one who is not far from each one of us.

Sometimes our words about Jesus fall on deaf ears, either because we have not learned the right language or because those to whom we speak have become so jaded and cynical that no mere words can break through to them. That is when, if we are to become evangelists, to make known the knowable God at places like Mars Hill, we must be willing to be groped for God. We must be the ones who spell it out with our fingers when our mouths are useless, with our love when our words have too many syllables, with our giving when we have nothing left to say, even with our very lives when our speech is prohibited. Blessed be doubting Thomas who was able to touch Jesus’ hands and side to know he was come again in flesh and blood, as a man, and not as a ghost. Blessed be Helen Keller who was able to touch Anne Sullivan’s hands and know she was not alone in the world. And blessed be all who come to know God by touching our lives as they are lived in faithfulness to the God we have come to know, and who has made us the body of Jesus Christ to the world. Amen.