

A majestic and intimate God

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In his speech at the Areopagus Paul proclaims:

God is the creator of everything.

God is not limited by (does not live in) human-made things.

God does not need anything from human beings.

Humans all come from one ancestor (or one blood) and are all God's offspring.

God is the matrix of existence—in whom “we live and move and have our being.” These things together present a very majestic idea of God as powerful and all-pervasive.

We humans do not know this God, said Paul, but we search and grope for God, who is like “an unknown god” to us. This does not stop God from knowing us, and being in relationship with us.

How can God be both majestic and intimate? I had a professor who grew up as the child of Baptist missionaries in India. His favorite image of God was the image of a kneeling elephant.

There is a story of a group of blind men who encountered an elephant for the first time and tried to describe it. One touched its giant leg and said, “It’s like a tree.” Another felt its writhing trunk and said, “No, no. It’s like a giant python.” A third encountered the tail and said, “Are you crazy? It’s like a coarse rope!”

God is like the elephant to us, in that none of us have the capacity to see the fullness of God, or conceive of the total majesty of God.

Yet this tremendous unknowable God knows us and chooses to be in relationship with us. It's as though the elephant is kneeling down near us, so as to be less distant and overwhelming.

Paul addressed the Athenians "and all the foreigners living there" with an inclusive "we." Since we are all children of God, all created by God, he said, then we should understand that we can't create God. A child does not give birth to his or her parent, and creatures do not create their own creator.

However creatures do create. And children speak about their parents and strive to be like them. So while Paul says that God is not "like" an image created by the "art and imagination of mortals" (17:29), he nevertheless uses human poetry to speak about what God is like. Art can begin to describe God, and open our hearts or minds toward an experience of God.

We can embrace human creativity as a gift from God which can also help us to draw closer to God and understand the nature of God a bit better.

Recently I have embraced Brian McLaren's concept of "spiritual friendship." I think that Paul practiced spiritual friendship in the way he engaged the people of Athens. He encountered the people there with attentiveness and respect and learned from them as well as sharing his own insights. He "looked carefully" at the objects of their worship, and then affirmed the people as "religious in every way." He acknowledged and honored them.

Paul proclaimed the good news with a spirit of respect and not domination. He had a tone of invitation and not insistence, relatedness and not rejection. These attitudes make up a posture of hospitality which foster kinship rather than estrangement, transformation rather than entrenchment. In spiritual friendship we are all changed as we endeavor to draw closer to God.