

A few days ago I attended a luncheon, and the coordinators had arranged a “pastors table” — either so that we could “network” or to keep us contained, like a spin-off on the “children’s table” at nice family get-togethers. Maybe both: because even small talk and networking among pastors tends to hover around some generally unusual topics: all the best Bible jokes from seminary; whether we’d prefer to officiate a wedding or a funeral; memories from visits to our people in the hospital.

In one of those conversations, about visiting people in the hospital, a retired United Methodist pastor shared some of his wisdom with me. The times when people are facing illness or injury, he said, are often the times when we feel most connected to the holy. He told me that a question he liked to ask people while they were going through a difficult time was “How have you seen God during this time?”

He shared some of the answers he remembered, and I thought of some of the ways our people have answered that question, even without me asking it directly. I think the most common answer would be that people feel God working through the special care of nurses, who provide not only information and medical attention, but also comfort and kindness when they are most needed; in fact I heard a nurse described as “an angel of God” just last week. People talk about feeling more sure of God’s care for them as they hear that friends and congregations all across the country are praying for them. People talk about times when someone shared a Bible verse with them, and that verse was so well-tuned to their situation that the gift of that verse at that moment must have been a “God thing.”

In the midst of my conversation with that retired pastor, I thought of one story in particular: one morning, when our late sister Josette Starkey was going in for a chemotherapy treatment, her hope running low, she got on the elevator to find a man with a big box of chocolate-frosted donuts. Donut Guy was the only man on an elevator full of women, all of whom were no doubt in some kind of stress, being in the hospital and all. And it turns out he had more donuts than he needed, so donut guy did the most saintly thing possible: he offered donuts to all those hospital elevator-riders. Josette said, “Oh, I’ve been craving a donut for days! Thank you!” and instantly became the happiest woman in Williamson County. She ate that donut like it was food sent down from heaven, and then she told every other chemo patient, every receptionist, every nurse about that donut as if it were the gospel. Whether he knew it or not, Donut Guy became a bearer of God’s presence that day — just by reaching out to people in a dark place and offering them a little light and a little kindness.

There’s a phrase that comes down to us from the Celtic tradition — “thin places” — which is used to describe the places where the wall or the distance between heaven and earth, between the everyday and the mystical, between the secular and the sacred — where that “between” barrier feels thinner. Places where it feels like we can *almost* see through into the invisible realm of the holy, where it feels like we could *almost* reach out our hand and touch God.

One travel writer described the power of thin places like this:

“[Experiencing] thin places does not necessarily lead to anything as grandiose as a ‘spiritual breakthrough,’ whatever that means, but it does disorient. It confuses. We lose our bearings, and find new ones. Or not. Either way, we are jolted out of old ways of seeing the world...”¹

“Thin places” was originally used to describe physical locations: mesmerizing places like a mountain peak rising out of the mist at dawn, or the ocean reaching out forever towards the horizon. But, I think, thin places can also come to us: moments when an everyday place suddenly becomes a thin place where we feel God nearer to us than usual. Suddenly we find ourselves in a thin place: there in the pew during worship; at the kitchen sink while praying; in an elevator.

Even painful, confusing, difficult places can become thin places; even hospital rooms and chemo sessions and bedside goodbyes. In fact maybe those painful moments are most likely to become thin places, because in those times we are so desperate for God that it opens our eyes to see God anywhere we can: even in things as ordinary as a phone call from friend or a man with a box of donuts.

I think that God wants to be found so readily all the time. And that seems to be one of the messages Paul preaches to the philosophers of Athens in today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

You know how a lot of writing teachers will say, “Show, don’t tell?” Well, Paul *shows* his listeners that God is available to be found by all people — that God *wants* to be found by all people. He does this by telling these philosophers how the God he’s been preaching about can be found in their own philosophy and traditions. He says he found an altar in the city dedicated “to an unknown god,” and then he says, “Well, I do know about this God. Let me tell you.”

And even when he’s using that altar to talk about the God that would have been best called the God of Israel or the God of Jesus (especially at that time) — he uses the philosophers’ understanding of the divine, not the Bible or the story of Jesus, to explain who that God is. Many of his listeners would have agreed that the God who created the world was not contained in the idols or accurately described by the old Greek myths; Paul’s listeners were already on board with the idea that God beyond all of that.² In fact Paul’s sermon is constantly referencing and quoting a poem by a Greek poet.³

¹ Eric Weiner, “When Heaven and Earth Come Closer,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2012. Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html> Accessed May 19, 2017.

² Riemer Faber, “The Apostle and the Poet: Paul and Aratus,” *Clarion* Vol. 42, No. 13 (1993); available online <http://spindleworks.com/library/rfaber/aratus.htm> Updated February 3, 2013; accessed May 22, 2017.

³ Aratus, “Phaenomena.” Available online <http://www.theoi.com/Text/AratusPhaenomena.html> Accessed May 22, 2017.

So first Paul shows his listeners how God is already there in their own traditions, wanting them to know God; and then Paul says it explicitly: the God I've been preaching about is the same God you talk about and think about. Not the God of one specific people, but the God who created all people, the God who hopes that all people "would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being', as even some of your own poets have said."

The message I get from Paul's ancient sermon is that God is not contained somewhere, but rather God is everywhere, among all people, waiting and hoping and longing to be found — calling out to all people.

Of course the frustrating thing about God not being contained — say, in a body we can talk to and audibly hear from — is that it's much harder to believe God is present when we can't see God or know exactly where God is. Would we rather have "thin places" and "in [God] we live and move and have our being," or would we rather be able to approach God in physical form, see God, hear God respond to us, feel God's physical touch?

As one scholar put it: When Jesus, in his farewell speech, promised the disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit to them after he died, the disciples may have felt like they were getting a raw deal. *Yeah, a spirit who advocates and comforts is great — but we'd much rather have you, Jesus. We can hear you. We can touch you. We can know you.*⁴

That's why that question from the United Methodist pastor can be so helpful: "How have you seen God?" That's different than "What do you know about God?" or "Can you feel God in your heart?" or — heaven forbid — "What is the nature of God?"

How have you seen God? — That question makes us think about concrete experiences we've had which have communicated God's presence to us. Almost like sacraments — something physical and everyday that gives us a little taste of God's love and care — or maybe of God's guidance or judgement or redirection.

And the stories we tell as we answer that question should remind us of something: God is not contained, but God is embodied — in us. As the Holy Spirit works in us, we become physical conveyers of God's presence for others. As we care for the sick or the lonely, as we rake someone else's leaves, as we provide food and a place to rest for people experiencing homelessness, as we share our donuts — we embody God's presence for one another.

God wants to be found by all people, and shows Godself in all of creation — including in us.

⁴ Matt Skinner on Working Preacher's *Sermon Brainwave* podcast (SB541, Sixth Sunday of Easter: May 13, 2017).