

Seeking God and Seeking to Make God Known

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Acts 17: 22 – 31

Actor Jim Carey is Bruce Nolan in the movie *Bruce Almighty*. Bruce becomes infuriated when he gets passed over as the number #1 news anchor for WKBW-TV. His violent, on-air outburst to the snub gets him fired. They literally throw him out into the company parking lot. As he walks toward his car, Bruce observes a group of thugs molesting and mocking a homeless man. He yells out, “Hey what are you doing over there? Leave the poor guy alone.” The gang begins to disperse, but “Almighty” Bruce isn't finished, “Yeh, that's right. You better keep walkin.” In seconds Bruce is on his back being pummeled by the gang. As he struggles to his feet, Bruce notices the homeless man is standing with a sign that reads, *Life Is Just*. Bruce yells, “*Just? just* get a clue!”

Later that night, Bruce's girlfriend Grace tries to console him. “Thank God, you're alright...you know things happen for a reason.” Bruce hates clichés, and he doesn't know God the way Grace does. Bruce rants, “God is a mean kid sitting on an ant hill with a magnifying glass and I am the ant. He could fix my life in five minutes if he wanted to, but he would rather burn off my feelers and watch me squirm.” Grace empathizes, “Honey, I understand your anger, but thank God you're o.k. This day could have been so much worse.” “O.k.?!?” Bruce yells, “Newsflash, I'm not o.k. I'm not o.k. with a mediocre job, I'm not o.k. with a mediocre apartment, I'm NOT o.k. with a mediocre life!” He yells at Grace before walking out and driving off.

As he drives through the streets of Buffalo, Bruce prays, “God, give me a signal. Please send me a sign.” A pick up truck pulls out in front of him. It is filled with traffic signs, *Wrong Way, Stop, Dead End, Do Not Enter*. Bruce is upset because the truck is moving slowly. After he zooms pass, he notices the rosary Grace gave him dangling from the rear-view mirror. He grabs them, “God, I'm desperate. I need your help Lord. Please reach

into my life..." then he hits a pot hole and drops the prayer beads. He reaches to retrieve them from under his seat and in so doing veers off the road long directly in the path of a streetlamp. The streetlamp wins. He hits his head on the steering wheel, but he's not seriously injured. As he steps out of the car still clutching the rosary. He hurls them into the nearby lake and hollers at God, "The gloves are off now pal. Smite me, Almighty Smiter! You're the one who should be fired. The only one not working around here is you! "Answer ME!" Suddenly his pager sounds. He doesn't recognize the number. He says, "Sorry, don't know you, and even if I did I wouldn't call you."

How should the Church react to Bruce and others who perceive God to be a really mean kid or distant deity who deserves to be fired? How can the Church communicate the gospel in an *unjust* world filled with idols? The Apostle Paul like a trusted anchorman gives us some clues. Clue #1, God Almighty is *just*, because he is transcendent yet personal. God has taken great care of his creation and remains active and involved in its turning out right. Clue #2, God is just, because his mercy endures not just for a few but for all humanity. He calls us to surrender to his loving Lordship and to discover our purpose in Him. And, clue #3, God is *just* because not only did he send Jesus to die for our sins, he resurrected King Jesus and in so doing turned the world upside down delivering us from human justice which is *retributive* to be made new creation in God's justice which is *restorative*.

Paul courageously walks the streets of Athens. He observes the plethora of idols throughout the city. The apostle has encountered great religiosity and idolatry during his extensive missionary travel. In Acts 14, he commanded a man who had never walked to stand to his feet. The crowds responded by naming Paul as the Greek god Hermes. The priest of Zeus brought sacrifices to worship Barnabas and Paul. Yet, many others weren't impressed by Paul Almighty and his posse of apostles for their exploits and preaching about Jesus. Some thugs from Antioch and Iconium stoned Paul and left him for dead. But, Paul was not done, some of the disciples gathered round him and helped him up. I can see Paul saying to his offenders, "You better keep walking." He would return to proclaim the Good

News in both those cities. While in Philippi, Paul commanded a spirit of sorcery out of a woman. Her owners had Paul and Silas dragged before the magistrates who stripped, severely flogged and threw them in prison. Yet, God is not done making his *justice* known through Paul. He's miraculously freed from jail and is commissioned to wait in Athens.

Athens is a peculiar city. It's vibrant, progressive, highly diverse, gossipy, pious and proud. It was a great university town like Durham. Paul conducts qualitative research on Athens and its people. He is struck by their extreme religiosity, superstitious nature and piety. Once the staunchest Pharisee of them all, Paul addresses Greek non-believers at Areopagus. Paul leverages his rhetoric on the peculiar altar bearing the inscription, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." Amidst their pantheon of gods for which they had names, it appears the Athenians wanted to be sure they had all bases covered for their fate, fame, and fortune. The Athenians were always seeking new ideas. But, to them Paul stood as a babbling beggar holding a sign that read, ~~Life~~ GOD IS JUST.

Pauls seeks to make God known to the Athenians as a JUST Creator who is personal and relentless in his pursuit of humanity for his glory and mutual enjoyment. A God who longs to walk with us even when we worship other idols and false gods. God, the Father Almighty, gives us ample time to find and be found by him. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob still yet pursues us and seeks to become known among us. Church, if you're seeking God, he can be known as *just* in an unjust world.

During Chapel worship on May 1st, we commissioned our Chapel PathWays summer interns as they prepare to live in intentional Christian community and work in Durham ministries, non-profit and faith-based organizations. We prayed God bless them with courage, faith, and mutual forbearance as they seek God and seek to make God known. As they walk through this great city and experience sections with high crime, dilapidated housing and poverty, they may struggle to see how God is *just*. We'll escort them to encounter God in the faces of the beautiful families and places within the boundaries of the

Bull's Eye where God's justice makes it possible for people to own homes despite being considered unworthy by all the creditors save Self-Help and Habitat for Humanity. We'll reflect with them about the ways God who has been revitalizing South West Central Durham for the past decade through specific people. This just and faithful God is being made known through the eyes of a little girl from the West End where a proud family raised her to become a Godly woman named Pauli Murray who defied gender and race barriers to become a lawyer, author, poet, and the first African-American female Episcopal priest.

There is a *just* God who cares about the personal stories and struggles of real people in real places. Durham is a peculiar city that often gets a bad wrap. Surely the amount of negative news reporting doesn't help. And, how can we respond when a 13 year girl is killed by a random bullet or when two teen boys kill each other, allegedly over a cell phone. A God who is merciful and *just* calls his people to act in faith and humbly seek Him. So, keep walking throughout our city's blight and when you come upon the place where a violent homicide occurred take the hand of a neighbor as she is led in prayer by a priest or pastor commissioned by the Religious Coalition for a Non-Violent Durham. There you will hear the heart of a *just* God who cares about the weeping mothers of murdered children. Friend, there is a God who cares about people, communities and cities.

I invite to join us as we seek God and seek to make God known in Durham. I recently learned from several reliable sources that there are nearly 5,000 non-profit businesses and organizations operating in Durham. I'm told that's 5-6 times more than any other city of comparable size. I enjoy listening to the hearts of the directors and staff of NPOs such as CAARE Inc., Good Work, Self-Help, Urban Ministries of Durham, World Relief and Genesis Home to name a few. In the faces of these leaders and the people they serve and work with, I see the face of a *Just* God who cares, who is kind and benevolent, and is actively working for good in our city. Church, we are called to keep walking, seeking, believing, proclaim God is *just*.

Yet, when we experience and witness the war, destruction and evil that abounds, I can understand why some would want to fire God. Bruce is right, life is not *just*. The storms of life blow on the *just* and the *unjust*. However, Paul is more right, God is *just*. God Almighty continues to be at work in the world delivering on his promise of restoring the world to rights through Jesus Christ. The literal and spiritual storms of life are raging, yet God Almighty is moving, calling and mobilizing his people to action in Durham and beyond. There is a *just* God at work ridding the world of evil, restoring and reconciling all creation. As Paul says, this God is not far from each one of us.

And he wasn't far from Bruce either. Remember his pager sounding? Bruce tried to ignore it. But, it kept beeping even after he threw it out and it was run over by a car. Finally, he decides to call the number. It was a recorded personal message inviting him to appear for a top job opportunity. He's weirded out by this, but he's desperate. He meets the director and is given great status and power which he uses diabolically to exact revenge on the man who was promoted over him and to gain the top news anchor job he's always wanted. He gets it and goes back to his girlfriend Grace. How fitting a name. She's been praying for Bruce daily and forgives him for running out on her. She loves him for who he is not for the prestigious job he wins. But, the delusion of power, status and Bruce's ego quickly get the best of him. Grace catches him kissing a co-worker. Now, it seems Grace is gone for good. Bruce finally realizes he's out of control again. Frustrated he walks out of the news station into the downtown streets of Buffalo. Crowds are rioting after a major league baseball championship. Bruce breaks down and tells God he surrenders to his will. Suddenly a bright light appears out of nowhere. It's a truck emerging in front of him yet again. This time the truck is coming at him. The truck wins. Miraculously Bruce survives the near fatal incident, but not until he's had a heavenly encounter with God Almighty. This *just* God invites Bruce to pray once more for something he really cares about. He prays for Grace to be happy and to meet someone who sees her through God's eyes. The way he sees her now. When Bruce awakens in the hospital, Grace is at his bedside, and it is her donated blood that sustains his life.

Paul can relate to Bruce *just* as well as you and I can. He fought against God. He made God an enemy. But he surrendered to God after he was stopped in his tracks by God's radiant light. Now Paul preaches about a *just* God who saved us by grace and sent Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. In Jesus we find God. Paul who once fought God, then sought God, now knows God as one who cares about the thorns in our flesh and the live cancers and toxics in our bodies. This God said my grace is sufficient. Jesus is Grace who brings God near. God sees us through the magnified lens of Jesus and comes close to us today in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. God is not distant. God is not far off. God is not a mean kid. God is *just*. God is *just* Jesus. *Just* Jesus who is known as Emmanuel. *Just* Jesus who said, "I will not leave you comfortless." *Just* Jesus who died on the cross and said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." *Just* Jesus who said, "Where I go we may go also." *Just* Jesus who is the resurrected Lord and King. Friends, that's all God is. God is *just* Jesus who longs to be known as a *Just* God in and through you, and you, and you, and you, ... and me.