

"Not Far"

Acts 17:22-34

APR 27 2008

Easter 6A

Today, I'd like to take your measurement. I'm going to measure something about you that is very important. Don't be nervous! Believe me, I'm the one who is nervous because I've never done this before! So what am I going to measure? It's not your height, it's not your weight, it's not your girth, it's not your age, and it's not the size of your bank account. It's even more important than that! So get ready.

I've always wanted to do this, and now that it's actually happening I'm so excited that I'm shaking. I haven't been this nervous since that time in 1983 when I had to stand in front of all the ministers and elders of Baltimore Presbytery and explain what exactly God had called me to do. That was twenty five years ago, and it appears that my answers were satisfactory.

The inspiration for this comes from the scripture reading from Acts. Acts tells the story of how Paul became the best known apostle, fired up by the Holy Spirit, and reaching out into the world to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Take a look at the maps of Paul's journeys in the back of the Bible and you can see how widely Paul traveled as an evangelist.

This story from Acts 17 takes place in Athens, the leading city of the Greek world, Paul speaks courageously to a crowd of people who worship different gods, or no god at all, and invites them to follow Jesus Christ. Paul says something that gets my attention: "God is not far from any of us". God is not far from any of us. And this is what I want to measure right now, how close or far from God you are. I brought my tape measure, a yard stick, and a set of binoculars to help me give you a scientifically accurate answer.

How close are you to God? Would anyone like to volunteer to go first? OK, just stand right here and let me work this out. Of course, I have to take into account a lot of factors, so in the interests of time I'll just give you a rough estimate this morning.

Gwen, are you nervous? Just relax. By my calculations you are two feet and seven inches away from God. Not bad! I've considered your excellent worship attendance, generous envelope offerings, the frequency and alliterative poetry of your prayers, how well you hit the high notes in the last hymn, and, oh yes, who could forget that nice note you sent praising my last sermon? Two feet, seven inches. Very close.

Todd, isn't this exciting? Are you nervous? By my calculations you are five yards, two feet and eight inches away from God. So-so. I've considered the number of times I spotted you yawning during my last sermon, that pledge check that bounced back in October, and the time you used a bad word when you thought no one was listening. Five yards, two feet, eight inches.

Audrey, how close are you to God? Are you excited? I'm really nervous. OK, I'm going to need the binoculars for this one. It looks like four and a half miles. Think of it this way, God is here, and you're all the way over there in Elba, not close at all! Looks like you got lost (or God ditched you somewhere along the way). OK, what factors did I take into account? It was all of those bad thoughts you were having over the past few weeks – like on Tuesday when you complained about all the rotten things going on in the world, and then didn't do one thing to help anybody even once. You even forgot to pet your dog that day. Four and a half miles!

Jim, now it's your turn. Are you nervous? I know I am! Hmmm, even the binoculars aren't going to be of much help in your case. This one is nearly off the scale. Let me use this specialized galactic positioning device. Looks like eleven point six light years. That means for you to reach God you would have to travel at the speed of light for eleven and a half years of your life, 186,000 miles per second! It's pretty simple. You belong to the wrong political party, and I can see that you have taken some positions on important issues that are completely wrong. What you've been saying about the war and the economy is completely stupid. Since I belong to the correct political party it's easy to see how far away from God you really are. Light years!

OK, enough of this measuring. The thing every one of you should be saying good and loud is "who appointed you to measure how close I am to God? Isn't that something between me and God alone? You are making a terrible assumption – that all of your opinions are the same opinions God has." Well, if you were thinking that as I took these measurements you are absolutely correct.

I appalled when I hear news commentators or religious luminaries making comments about the suitability of a political candidate's religious faith or affiliation. I would never try to measure how close or far you or anyone else is from God.

So how close are you to God? I shouldn't have anything to say about it, should I? It's between you and God. But I do know this, that the measurement of the distance between you and God is not nearly as important as the fact that God is trying everything to close the gap. There's a lot you can do to close the distance, by making better choices for sharing, peace, love and justice, but let's be clear that God takes the biggest steps of all to close the gap, even when you are retreating and sprinting in the opposite direction. In my view that is the sum total of the Bible's meaning: God is not far from you, and God is trying to get even nearer to you. It's what Paul said, and it's what I believe.