



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Introduction to Christian Mysticism:*

*“All is One”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
November 16, 2025

**Scripture Reading:** Acts 17:22-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Then Paul stood up before the council of the Areopagus and delivered this address: “Citizens of Athens, I note that in every respect you are scrupulously religious. As I walked about looking at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’ Now, what you are worshiping in ignorance I intend to make known to you. For the God who made the world and all that is in it, the Sovereign of heaven and earth, doesn’t live in sanctuaries made by human hands, and isn’t served by humans, as if in need of anything. No! God is the One who gives everyone life, breath—everything.”*

*“From one person God created all of humankind to inhabit the entire earth, and set the time for each nation to exist and the exact place where each nation should dwell. God did this so that human beings would seek, reach out for, and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us—the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As one of your poets has put it, ‘We too are God’s children.’ If we are in fact children of God, then it’s inexcusable to think that the Divine Nature is like an image of gold, silver or stone—an image formed by the art and thought of mortals. God, who overlooked such ignorance in the past, now commands all people everywhere to reform their lives. For a day has been set when the whole world will be judged with justice. And this judge, who is a human being, has already been appointed. God has given proof of all of this by raising this judge from the dead.”*

## Sermon

Well, this is one of my favorite passages in scripture . . . although it's a heresy. (*Laughter*) I was invited once to preach at the Seminary, and I chose this text. So far, I haven't been invited back, but we'll see. (*Laughter*)

It represents what for traditional Christianity is a heresy, pantheism. The idea that God is everywhere, that the Church has no copyright on love or truth or goodness. There's nothing that seems more obvious to me than that. Because when you look at religions that believe they're the one path, they do more evil than any non-religious person can even think of doing. When you

believe yours is the one savior, you can be tempted to *torture* people so that they convert and don't spend eternity in Hell. When you believe you're the chosen people that God has given you a certain track of land, you can be *absolutely brutal* in the name of God to those who don't fit in that narrative. When you believe that you have the one true prophet, there's no reason to listen to anyone else. So I don't believe there's any idea more repudiated than the idea that God is one, meaning any particular religion has a copyright on love or the sacred or God or whatever you want to call it.

At the same time, there's an experience that people have that's one of the most wonderful experiences someone can have. If you've ever looked up at the sky and felt yourself being transformed, felt yourself dissolving, and this idea of infinity just freaked you out. And you had some sense of your own cosmic origins. If you've ever been in a forest and felt a kindredship with the plants, the animals. If you've ever stood on a beach and felt the power of the ocean and felt yourself transformed. I believe those are the foundations for religion.

I believe the foundation for true religion is mystical, which doesn't mean supernatural. It means a sense of the source out of which you come, feeling your roots. It means a sense of a tie that binds you to all other beings. And a sense of being addressed by life, by the intelligence that's embedded in life, that you're being taught by life. That can be superstitious, but can also be the most helpful gift in the world. I don't think traditional religion is very good at teaching that, but I think you already know it.

What I'm hoping to do in this series is to affirm or reaffirm to you what your heart knows, and that there is a source out of which you come, and no human being gives you that. You're coming from the foundation of things. There's a sense in which you're inter-woven, not with Christianity, not America, but with Life itself.

Then finally, there's a meaningfulness in your existence, where every being, every chemical is connected. When we get to the last in this series, I want to look at the periodic chart because to me, there's nothing more religious and sacred (*Laughter*) and weird than the fact that there's a mathematical substrata to everything that we experience.

I think a lot of the bad religion we see comes from shallowness. It's not bad people, it's *shallowness*. When you don't feel your roots, you feel terror. When you don't know where you come from or where you're going, it's very easy to shut down and become cruel.

When I was younger, I had an experience, which wasn't supernatural, but it was mystical for me. It was on a beach in Mexico, and they had what they call a red tide. Have you ever heard that where the algae is like died or something like that? It's phosphorescent, the waves glow. It was a night with no moon, no stars. You couldn't see anything except for the glowing waves. You couldn't see the ocean, just the glowing waves.

I realized that's the human condition. We come from a depth and a power we can't understand. We only see the surface of things. We see objects as separate from one another. And yet we know in our hearts, things are interwoven. So faith is not about belief. Faith is about the core experiences of being a human being in the Cosmos.

One of the ways I'm trying to say that in this series is that there are views of religion where God is *A* being and views where God is a *symbol* within *Being* itself. I'm not asking you to choose between the two of those. But mysticism is believing the sacred is in *Being* itself, which means it's always here. When it's *A* being, you may feel alone or left behind. If it's in *Being* itself, you know as soon as you tune in, it's there. You don't have to beg, you don't have to pray. You just have to open yourself and tune yourself.

We're looking at a story today that I find fascinating. Paul is such a strange character. He's a genius, but he's also very human and a little bit curmudgeonly, sometimes a lot curmudgeonly.

Paul loves other religions and other philosophies. That's part of what's been forgotten. In this section of Acts, he's seeking out philosophers. In this speech, he's going to quote Greek philosophers, which traditional Christians didn't know enough about other religions or philosophies to even know that.

They don't realize that he's quoting in here. They don't realize that Jesus is sometimes quoting Jewish mysticism when he says, "*I'm the way, I'm the path, I'm the door.*" That was a vocabulary that was already there. Paul is at what's called Mars Hill or the Areopagus, which Mars Hill is easier to say.

There's a story that, again, has been forgotten by many Christian biblical interpreters, that there was a plague in Athens long before this. So they called the wisest of philosophers, Epimenides from Crete, and he said,

*For some reason, we have a plague. We have these pestilents. We don't know why. But we must have done something wrong."*

So in his wisdom, he says,

*Yes, you've ticked off gods, but we don't know which ones. So the scientific method I want to use is to get a bunch of sheep. When the sheep lie down in certain areas, we will then build a temple to the unknown God.*

Science. (Laughter)

We often think of Greeks as these incredible, wise philosophers. Some of them were. But some of them were very superstitious. And there's no greater superstition than the belief that your philosophy captures life. One of the things that really hobbled Christianity for centuries was not anything that Jesus taught, but they were trying to reconcile Christianity with Aristotle. They're trying to make it logical. It's called the "Charlie Kirk disease" in clinical terms. (Laughter) We're going to look at this story and see what we can get out of it, I hope.

Paul then quotes from the philosopher that did that and says, "*People look for God, but they don't really have to, because in God we live and breathe and move and have our being.*" He's quoting their own philosopher there. He quotes another philosopher that says, "*We are the offspring of God.*" And what, again, is not remembered by Christian theology is that there was a saying at the time, "*All Cretans are liars. One of their own philosophers said so.*" Now, that is a logical paradox. (Laughter) When Paul says that, it's a joke. It's a joke. It would be incredibly stupid to say, "*All Cretans are liars. My proof is this Cretan said so.*" (Laughter)

So he's playing with it to some extent, but he wants people to get beyond their fear, this idea that they've done something wrong. And what he's doing in different parts of the world is trying to use Jesus and his sacrifice to get people out of their fear.

Now, the problem is the Church decided, *Well, let's keep the fear part*. If you don't believe you've done something horribly wrong, then it's wrong for the Church to make you feel guilty and then save you. The people Paul is talking about are already feeling *doomed*.

If they have animal sacrifices, then he's going to say, *"Jesus has done this sacrifice. You don't have to worry about that."* If in this case, you have this idea of this capricious God who just punishes you, and you don't even know why, and you don't even know which one, then Paul says, *"Well, I see you're very religious,"* but the word he uses can also mean *superstitious*. He uses that double meaning there.

He says, *"I want to tell you, I see you have all these different temples. I want to tell you about the unknown God."* In other words, he starts, instead of arguing with them about what they already believe, he sees a window in that sense of mystery they have, that there's something they don't know. If MAGA Christians just had any sense of humility, that there's something they don't know, we could open up an incredible window that would save so much pain for them as much as anyone.

As I look at this story, one of the things I hear Paul imploring people is, *your idea of unity is the most divisive thing there is*. Your idea of everybody should be, how everybody should think, is the most divisive thing there is. So what Paul is calling people to do is to not have this loyalty to one idea of God. Again, from a mystical viewpoint, you can believe in God as *A* being or God as *Being*. If God is *Being*, then you don't ever understand it or grasp it. You have to dissolve. You have to listen. You have to learn. You have to reorient yourself.

There's a wonderful story in Hinduism that I think makes this this point really well. It's called the Salt Doll. It's a salt doll who wants to understand the ocean. Now, this is obviously about human beings thinking they want to find God, but they don't, because if God is a ground of being, that means our egos have to dissolve. We do all the religious banter and stuff, but we don't really want to find our unity with every other being.

So this salt doll goes to the ocean, sees it, puts a toe in the water, pulls it back, and it doesn't have a toe anymore. It's a salt doll. I don't know if the salt doll is male or female or non-binary. It's hard to tell with salt dolls. *(Laughter)* But in the story, he/she/they put their foot in, the foot isn't there anymore. Puts finger in, no finger, no hand. It's dissolving into its ground of being. In some of the versions of the story, it says, "Now I know who I am." That *I am* is the same as the divine name in Christianity, the ground of our being, the roots that we have into the Cosmos.

We can't grasp unity. And for the Church to say God is one isn't helpful if that doesn't mean every religion has a piece of that. Every non-religion. If Christianity keeps you from respecting atheistic people, you've misunderstood it. Because everyone who loves is born of God in Christianity. So any religion that broadens you, deepens you, makes you more curious about life;

that's a good religion. Any religion that limits you, that disempowers you, is a bad religion, no matter what the label says. So that's the first thing, that we don't grasp unity, we dissolve into it. It's a kindred spirit. It isn't a unified creed.

And the second thing is that in order to accept that and understand that we have to be transformed. It's almost like we have to be turned inside out. Instead of trying to get God in us, say Christ lives in me, instead, I want to find that in which I live and move and have my being. I don't have to call it God. But I'm part of something larger than myself. And that's what ties me to you. Whether I like you or not is irrelevant. We're woven together. Our fates are woven together. So there's a transformation that needs to take place.

Have you ever eaten a tangerine by turning it inside out, so you can get the fruit of it? Religions try to trick us into turning inside out. One of the ways that Christianity does that, used to do this back when it was in the mystery religions, is this cup [*holding the Communion cup*]. This cup represents the vortex out of which everything comes. One of the symbols is of a cup that doesn't empty. Jesus says, "*Whoever drinks from this cup will never again thirst.*" He's not talking about this [*cup*]. He's talking about the source of your own being.

I love the story of The Wizard of Oz because the tornado is that vortex of transformation. It's like you leave your ordinary life, you go someplace else, and realize, *Okay, the miracle was always here. I don't have to go somewhere else to find the miracle.*

The word *God* in Hebrew means *Being*, as we saw a couple of weeks ago. The word *Zeus* in Greek means *Life*. When people say that Zeus didn't exist, Paul is going to try to dissuade them by quoting Aratus. There was a story at the time that God was dead. I believe it was on the island of Crete that supposedly Zeus had been buried. This ticked off the Greeks. So Aratus wrote a poem that said, to Zeus, "*Thou are not dead, thou livest and abidest forever, for in thee we live and move and have our being.*"

See, Paul is quoting a Greek philosopher. He says,

*From Zeus, let us begin, whom we, mortals, never leave unnamed. Full of Zeus are all streets and all gathering places of human beings. And full are the seas and harbors. Everywhere we have need of Zeus, for we are also his offspring.*

That's the other quote. Paul wasn't saying that people who believed in Zeus were wrong. He was saying, you have to get the roots to which that symbol refers.

There's also a wonderful quote from Einstein that I use. It's supposed to be from Einstein. It's not really by Einstein. It was a minister that was trying to summarize Einstein. We don't really have Einstein's approval to this, (*Laughter*) but it's still a great summary of this idea of the tie that binds us.

*A human being is a part of the whole called by us Universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, an optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our own personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by*

*widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."*

I think that's what Paul is trying to say when he says, "*In God, we live and move and have our being.*"

The final thing is, one of the things that trapped the Greeks was they thought their language described reality perfectly. Again, it's the "Charlie Kirk disease." If you define something, then you understand it. That's not true. Logic and biology do not mesh. They may overlap from time to time.

We've been taught to think of God in terms of nouns. The universe doesn't break down into nouns. It doesn't even break into nouns and verbs. It's a very strange place. And so you experience this sacred. It doesn't have to be a *person*, and it doesn't have to be a *miracle*. It can be a *quality*.

Think of a fish who was looking for the ocean. This was a flying fish. It couldn't leave the ocean to see what it was talking about. Instead, it would experience warmth, buoyancy, saltiness. I don't have a whole lot of fish experience, but that's my guess. (*Laughter*)

How different would our lives be if we could be fed by the qualities of our experience? Not necessarily getting what we think we want, but being fed by the quality of our experiences, by the beauty of the stars, by that strange, strange bond we feel with animals or people, newborn children. We don't even know them. A lot of times, they're not very mature. But there's a sacred bond there that we feel.

If a child were not weaned of its pacifier, it would die of starvation. Many adults I know are starving and thirsting because the religion that was taught to them as a child is a *pacifier*. It doesn't nurture them. It doesn't illumine their journey. It doesn't feed them.

We don't have to be restricted to what we were taught as children. Every person in this room has had experiences that might be called mystical. You may not like the vocabulary. You may not want it to be religious at all, and that's fine. But you come from a depth that goes down into the Cosmos. You are united with every being; the ones you like, the ones you hate, it really doesn't matter.

Then finally, life addresses you with everything that happens. It teaches you. The intelligence in life speaks to the intelligence in you. When you're at the sea, you become silent. You become as receptive as you could possibly be. And the sea teaches you. The stars teach you.

The gift that Paul is trying to give us includes our hearts, our minds, and our strength. It says that we are not lost, that whatever the source that gives us life and being, surrounds us like a warm blanket. In it, we live and move and have our being. We don't really need to go looking for it, for we are its offspring.

I invite you now to your own reflection on these words.

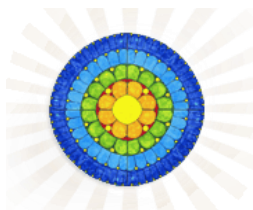
## Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

As we continue on our journeys of trying to figure out the source from which we came and what all of that means, I would remind you that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that some folks call God. That spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness.

So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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