

The Whole World in His Hands

Acts 17:22-31 | 5/21/2017

Can any of you name the Top 5 songs on the Billboard Hot 100 list? Maybe even one? They are:

Despacito by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee, featuring Justin Bieber

That's What I Like by Bruno Mars

I'm the One by DJ Khaled featuring Justin Bieber, Quavo, Chance the Rapper and Lil Wayne

Shape of You by Ed Sheeran, and

Humble by Kendrick Lamar

I guess it just shows how out of it I am, since I only recognize about half of the artists and none of the songs!

Billboard also tracks gospel music as a separate genre, but occasionally a gospel song crosses over and leaps to the top of the pop charts. For example, in 1969 "Oh Happy Day" by the Edwin Hawkins Singers reached No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart, and in 1971 "Put Your Hand in the Hand (of the Man)" by Ocean peaked at No. 2 on the same chart.

But only one gospel song has ever reached No. 1 and it was in 1958. It was "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," as recorded by a young British boy named Laurie London, accompanied by the Geoff Love Orchestra. He was only 14. In April 1958, London's rendition of the song reached No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and remained there for four weeks. It sold over a million copies. It was awarded a gold disc by the Record Industry Association of America that same year. Though London went on to make other recordings, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" was his only hit record.

But now here's the question: Do you *believe* God has the "whole world in his hands"? Some of you might reply, "Well, of course I do. Why else would I be here in church today?" But others might respond, "Yes, I'm here, but sometimes I'm not so sure. There's so much trouble and pain in the world, including in my corner of it. Sometimes it seems as if *nobody* has the world in his hands." Let's leave that right there while we look at our Scripture reading, but we'll come back to it.

In the reading, the apostle Paul finds himself in Athens, one of the most cosmopolitan centers of his day. The intellectuals of that city loved to debate and often gathered at the city forum, called the Areopagus, to do so. Paul, never one to miss an opportunity, seized the moment there to present his case for the God he worshiped and served. The Athenians worshiped many gods, but didn't know much about *that* God. They had constructed many altars to various gods, but Paul noticed one with an inscription reading, "To an unknown god."

Paul viewed that altar as a sign of a human need to worship God, and he said, in effect, to those gathered, "This altar shows that you have the yearning to worship, but you don't know who to worship." He proceeded to tell them about the God of heaven and earth, who made the world and everything -- and everyone -- in it. He even quoted one of their own poets, referring to God: "In him we live and move and have our being."

In saying this, Paul asserted that not only his own life, but also the lives of the Athenians, were in God's hands. "In him we live and move and have our being," is just another way of saying, "He's got the whole world in his hands." Perhaps you understand this intuitively because there's something in your heart that wants to connect with Something or Someone bigger than you.

But to express it in a contemporary context, let's think about the apostle Paul showing up in a Tucson Starbucks. What do you suppose Paul would say if he showed up not on the brow of a Greek hill surrounded by temples, but rather inside a Starbucks near the U of A, handing out mocha lattes all around?

"Tucsonans, I see how extremely religious you are, in every way," Paul might begin. But instead of speaking of temples to unknown gods, he might say something like this: "I have observed how many of you are fond of saying, 'I'm spiritual, but not religious.' I'm aware how increasing numbers of you never cross the threshold of a

church or synagogue or a mosque, but spend hours browsing religious books at Bookman's. Many of you wear crosses around your necks, but hardly know why. You may finger them in moments of fear or anxiety and feel vaguely comforted. You sit at home, channel-surfing the televangelists and religious talk shows, hoping to glean some spiritual comfort, but you never linger long enough to submit yourselves to their teachings. You have an insistent curiosity about things religious, and vow that one day you will do something about it. But somehow you never find the time ... you just never find the time."

The religious or spiritual impulse is a significant clue to the reality of God in our world and God's sovereignty over it. In varying degrees, most of us have that same hunger. We may or may not have pursued it, but this "will to believe" can help us to know who has "the whole world in his hands."

Now, some things to consider.

But there's no proof. Nothing whatsoever in the way of scientific proof one way or the other. Can't prove or disprove the proposition that "he's got the whole world in his hands." It's just not that kind of conversation. Although such discussions can be interesting and perhaps, for some, even persuasive, ultimately there's just no incontrovertible proof that holds up under the scrutiny of the scientific rules of evidence.

What we know, we know by faith. The affirmation that God has "the whole world in his hands" is a conclusion reached by faith, not by incontrovertible data as science understands data and evidence. But that doesn't make the conclusion less reasonable. Frank Schaeffer, in his book *Crazy for God*, points out that whether we are secular or religious, we all make our biggest life-shaping decisions by faith. Schaeffer said, "You would have to live a lifetime to be qualified to make any big decisions." And since we can't do that, "we make a leap of faith when it comes to what we should believe in, who we will marry and our careers."

He goes on to say, "Who we happen to meet, one conversation when you were eighteen, the college course you happened to sign up for, the teacher you liked, the elevator you missed and the girl you met in the next one, decide whole lives. ... Only the trivialities -- say, buying cars, washing machines or airline seats -- are chosen on the basis of good information."

Trusting God is a choice. Okay then. Choosing a spouse, believing in God -- there's a huge leap of faith involved. What it comes down to is that trusting God is a choice. Mature faith is not so much a feeling as it is a decision. We'll always have enough evidence to **make** a leap of faith as well as to **not** make that leap. One way or the other, it's a choice.

The fourth thing to consider is that it's not about overcoming doubt or having all questions answered. It's about having a conviction that the ultimate answers to life are known by God -- and only by God. Yes, we can know a lot. We can understand, we can come to terms with, we can accept -- a lot. But *ultimate, full, all-comprehending knowledge* is beyond our pay grade. We live on a "need to know" basis, and we've got to be comfortable with that. Some things are for God and God alone to know.

But our conviction that "he's got the whole world in his hands" is totally plausible and rational -- a belief that springs from the very core of our being. We **know** that, as the apostle Paul reminds us in this text, "In him we live and move and have our being."

Lord knows that there are so many struggles and crises in our lives that we sometimes feel that **nobody** has the world in his hands. Nobody is at the wheel. We have so many questions that we often seem to be wandering in circles. But the Lord knows us, too, and says to us, "Come unto me. I am the Alpha and Omega. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. You need not wander or wonder. You know me, you know God. And I will be with you

always, even unto the end of the age." Amen.

PASTOR KEITH

Children's Sermon

Tell the children that you're going to teach them a new song. Then do so by singing a couple verses of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." It's an easy song to sing, and the kids soon will be singing and clapping along with you. Perhaps the congregation will join in. Then ask the children *who* has "the whole world in his hands." Discuss what it means that God is taking care of the whole world. You might mention that it means that God is always with us and that, no matter what happens, God will take care of us. Sometimes this might be difficult to remember. Having a song to sing to remind us will help us when we're sad and things do not seem to be going right. Sing the song again and add hand motions to go with the song. Close with a prayer: "Great and loving God, thank you for watching over your world and our world -- the world we live in. It is a big job! Help us to trust you to make everything right and help us not to make your job harder. Amen."

Alternative Conversation with the Children

Find a stand-alone globe, the bigger the better. Perhaps an elementary school teacher in the congregation can help you secure one. A librarian is another resource. Let the children cluster around it and give it a spin or two. Show them where the United States is. Ask them if they know about other countries, then ask them to point the country out on the globe if they can. Ask them if they've ever been to an ocean. Let them show you the oceans of the world. Perhaps the globe can be lifted out of its restraints and you can hold it in your hands. Talk about God being the creator of the world, and that God still has the whole world in his hands.--Based on an idea suggested by Rev. Donald McKee, Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Montevideo, Minnesota.