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Back when I served a congregation in Illinois, my friend Mohammed and I were driving home from a Council on American-Islamic Relations dinner in Chicago. I had been invited to attend the award dinner to be recognized for an editorial I had written for our local newspaper encouraging Christians to engage in dialogue with Muslims, rather than treating them with suspicion and hate. Mohammed and I had worked together in an interfaith organization we co-founded in our community, and so we had built a trusting relationship through several years. On the drive home from Chicago, he asked me, “I’ve heard Christians use the word *grace*. Can you explain what grace means?”

I replied, “Grace is God’s amazing love and acceptance of us, even when we mess up our lives. Jesus came to remind us of God’s love, and even though humanity hung him on a cross to die, God continues to love us. Grace is God’s love—undeserved, something we can’t earn. God freely

offers us forgiveness in the midst of our mistakes and sins. That’s grace.”

Mohammed replied, “Grace! What a wonderful word! We have a similar idea in the Qur’an, but we use a different word for it.” He then told me of passages in Islam’s holy scriptures that reflect God’s grace. Ever since that conversation, my friend Mohammed always jokingly introduced me as his Christian friend who taught him about God’s grace.

In addition to Muslims, I made some of my closest friends in Illinois through our interfaith group, including Jews, Baha’is, Mormons, and Catholics. We visited one another’s places of worship and heard presentations from Hindus and Sikhs and Buddhists, celebrating that we all worship the same God. We never tried to convert one another to our own faith, but we discovered that our own faith deepened as we engaged in conversations with those of other religions. As we listened and learned from one another, our vision of God became broader, for God is bigger than any of us

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could ever envision. Learning about another religion doesn't mean we give up our faith in Jesus Christ.

I think that's bit what Paul experienced as he visited the city of Athens, a large metropolitan city in Greece. The city was filled with people from many cultures, with many ideas and philosophies. In all the diversity, Paul looked and listened to those around him. He encountered those who worshiped idols. He met Epicureans, who followed a philosophy that rejected divine intervention and instead focused on modest pleasure and happiness. He also encountered Stoics, who taught that we should live in the moment and not be controlled by our desires for pleasure or our fear of pain. As they heard Paul speak about Jesus and his resurrection, they invited him to the Areopagus, a rocky hill where citizens gathered for court hearings or lectures.

They invited Paul to make a speech about his views, and rather than condemning their ideas, Paul began by proclaiming, "Those of you living in Athens, I see how extremely religious you are in

every way." That's a much better way to enter a conversation than, "You idol worshipers. Why are you worshiping blocks of wood who can't move?" Or "How can you Epicureans reject God's role in our lives and focus only on your own happiness." Or "You Stoics, have you no feelings for God?"

If Paul had begun his speech with words of criticism or condemnation, no one would have listened to what he had to say. Instead, he observed how he had seen in the city an altar with the inscription, "to an unknown god," and Paul turned it into an opportunity. "I'll introduce you to this god you worship as unknown, to this god you don't know," he told them. "This is the God who made the world and everything in it. All nations came from this one God to live and fill the entire earth. We are all God's offspring. God created boundaries where we would live in order that we might search for God, groping for God as we look beyond ourselves."

Have you ever found yourself groping for God, searching for answers in the midst of life's struggles? Maybe you've experienced the pains of

life and have wondered where God is in your suffering. Maybe you have thought about challenging questions, wondering about life and faith. Maybe you have wondered why good people suffer and why evil exists. Maybe you have struggled to pray, feeling at times as though no one is listening. In all these times, you're groping for God, searching and wondering about meaning, stretching and deepening your faith.

Sometimes in our searching for understanding, we long for others to hear our questions, as was the case with a young boy

ran into the living room where his father was reading. "Dad, where did I come from?" The boy's mother cleared her throat and excused herself to let Father answer this long-feared question. Father cleared his throat and went through a long, careful explanation of how children are born. When he was finally through, Junior commented, "That's OK, Dad; but my pal Joe down the street says he comes from Omaha, and I just wanted to know where I came from."¹

When it comes to difficult questions regarding faith, I've heard some people through the years say,

"You're not supposed to ask difficult questions. Just believe." Others have said, "Don't ask why such things happen. Just have faith." To be honest, I've never felt comfortable with such responses, for I'm always asking questions, seeking deeper meaning and understanding. Through the process I've discovered that my faith grows as I'm searching and groping for God.

It's ok, for example, to ask questions and have conversations with those of other religions. It's not about who's right or who's wrong or about trying to change one another's mind. It's about telling one's own story about how God has moved in your life. It's about discovering the vastness of how God has been involved with humanity, in many times and many places.

Through our questions, our struggles, and our dialogue with others, we might discover what Paul told those in Athens: "God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him. He isn't far from any of us, and he gives us the power to live, to move, and to be who we are."²

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It's through the asking, the searching, the groping, that we come to know God even better, which is something

a young man discovered when he visited the famous monk, Father Arsenius. The man was seeking God, trying to find an experience that would convince him of God's presence. The monk took the man down to the river and held the young man's head under water to the point where the man jumped up gasping for breath. "Why have you done this, Father? I came looking for God, and you nearly drowned me? I don't understand."

The wise monk replied, "When you desire God with the same intensity you desire air, you will find him."³

It's through our struggles of life, as we desire God with the intensity we long for air to breathe, as we grope around searching for meaning, that we will find God.

The Greek word *pselaphao* is translated in some Bibles as *grobe*, but the word can also mean to

handle, touch, or feel. Sometimes we may find ourselves wanting something tangible to hold onto when we search for God, desiring something solid when life becomes too difficult.

Interestingly, the Greek word for grope comes from the root word *psallo*, which means to pluck a musical instrument's string or to sing. The word is related to the word *psalm*, the collection of songs in the first portion of the Bible. I find it interesting that the word meaning *searching* or *groping* is related to the same word for *singing* or *playing a stringed instrument*. It's almost as though the word nudges us in our searching to gather and make music together. In our searching for something tangible, we find our foundation when gathered with one another, singing as a community of faith. May we continue groping for God, asking our questions, learning from one another, and singing our faith.

¹ Hodgin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers*,

Teachers, and Speakers (Kindle Locations 4181-4185). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #832

² CEV Bible, Acts 17:27-28.

³ William Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, p. 85 (adapted).