

"An Unknown God"

Acts 17:16-34

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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The Apostle Paul was killing time in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. He had been chased out of Thessalonica and Berea and was cooling his heels in the Greek city known for its intellectual and cultural elite. Paul was keeping a low profile, playing tourist, taking in the sights of this magnificent city. He was astounded at the "junkyard of idols" he encountered at every turn. One in particular caught his attention. It was a shrine to: "the god nobody knows."

He was so upset at the proliferation of false idols that he couldn't stay quiet any longer. He went to the synagogue, which was his habit in every place he went, and argued with the Jews. (That was his habit too.) After squabbling with them, Paul took on some of the resident philosophers- and there were plenty of those in this university city.

Due to their wealth, they had the luxury of doing nothing but discussing new ideas all day long. They reveled in vigorous intellectual discourse. The Athenians were consumers of knowledge and they liked nothing better than a good debate. Paul was in his element. Instead of the conflict he often encountered when speaking of his faith, in this place, Paul found a willing audience.

They gathered around and said, "Tell us about this new idea of yours." It was a delicate situation, though, because it was illegal to introduce foreign beliefs and foreign gods into the Athenian culture. As much as they loved learning about new ideas, they did have their limits. If you crossed the line you could pay with your life.

Paul recognized their deep spiritual hunger. It was obvious in the forest of idols to gods and goddesses throughout the city. They wanted so badly to cover all the bases that they even had one to the "god they hadn't met yet."

If there was another god out there somewhere that they didn't know about yet, they didn't want to offend him or her. So, they built a special idol, just in case.

One of the things that made Paul such an effective preacher was that he knew his audience. This is his only sermon in the book of Acts to a completely pagan group. They had no knowledge of the scriptures or the experience of the Hebrew people, so he drew instead from his own experiences and from the natural world to introduce them to the Creator God. He didn't criticize them for their religious buffet. In fact, he complimented them on their extensive religious searching.

He said, "You are obviously very religious people. Allow me to introduce you to the God you have not yet met. The One you have been searching for."

Paul agreed with their impulse to worship, it was the objects of their worship that he couldn't agree with. They are searching because they know something is missing in their lives. Paul is happy to show them the way; to tell them about the one true God, the Creator of the universe, the God who does not live in shrines of silver and gold carved by human hands, the One who is not set immobile in stone.

This God demands more, he tells them, more than a statue in the middle of the city. Paul showed his knowledge of their culture by adapting a quote from one of their own poets, Aratus of Soli, who said, "In him we live and move and have our being. Everywhere we all need Zeus, for we are also his offspring." Paul's adaptation of the famous quote went like this, "This is the God in whom we live and move and have our being. This is the living, loving God who calls you into a relationship. This is the God you have been searching and hungering for."

It is a search that has not ended. Fifth-century theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo, was famous for offering this prayer to God, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." In the 17th century, Pascal referred to the "infinite abyss" within the soul of every person for God alone.

I think the Athenians were probably with Paul until he got to the part where he called for repentance and introduced the Resurrection. He never mentioned Jesus by name, but he makes it clear that this "man," isn't just one of their idols. The Greek gods were divided and compartmentalized. Each one was responsible for a different part of their lives. Paul tells them that God in Jesus is the only one they need- the ground of being- all in one.

"The time of ignorance is over," he preaches, "it is time to turn away from idols and to turn toward the real thing." Paul couldn't understand how these rational, logical people could be so irrational and illogical to choose false gods when they could have the real thing.

Paul preaches his basic gospel message, "God loves you. Jesus changed my life. He can change yours too." It is the same message he has preached to Jews, but in Athens it is cloaked in Greek attire, showing respect for their culture and philosophy by speaking in a logical, coherent fashion. He demonstrated an understanding of their religious searching and experience. Paul makes concrete, specific claims about Jesus in response to their vague religious inclinations.

He could see their restlessness, their desperate spiritual hunger. He offered them a gourmet meal, a relationship with the one true God. He couldn't understand why they would choose instead to snack on the junk food religion of inanimate idols. Many of them were not ready to hear about the resurrected Christ. That was more than they could handle. Some made fun of Paul, but others said, "*Let's talk more about this tomorrow.*" Unlike his past experiences, no one tried to run him out of town, throw him in jail, or kill him. And at least a few people were open to hearing the truth and they became followers of Christ.

"Religion" is defined as the belief in and worship of a superhuman power or powers, especially a God or gods; it is a *unified system of beliefs and practices*. To be "religious" means having a strong belief in a god or gods; or relating to a religion.

So, are you religious? If Paul went wandering through your psyche, what idols would he stumble over? (No need to call them out!)

I think we all have idols tucked away that we take out now and then to polish and admire. Idols are those things, people, or situations to whom we offer our total attention, our worship, loyalty, money, love, and reverence -- in place of God. The last part of that sentence is the important part- "in place of God." There is nothing wrong with having loyalty to a sports team unless that is the only thing that fills your heart and leaves no room for God. Too many idols crowd our cities and our churches and our lives. They could be money, education, ideology, sex, military power, politicians, consumer goods, technology, even our families, relationships, and religion.

Religion has come to mean the institution that houses our faith. But faith is not religion. Faith is a relationship with the Creator God who came to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and rose from the tomb as the Risen Christ. When Paul was preaching to the Athenians, the church as a religious institution was not even imaginable. In fact, I doubt that Paul even thought of it as an institution at that point. It was a family of believers. They were Christians, followers of Christ, who were learning how to be a community of faith. As they grew in number, they had to put some kind of structure and organization in place to make sure everyone was cared for and to ensure that the faith was shared to the ends of the earth.

The intervening generations of Christian religious institutions have not always done Jesus any favors. Layers of corruption, wealth, power-mongering, violence, sexual abuse, homophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy have too often created idols out of what was intended to be an intimate relationship between God and God's children.

Human beings have caused a great deal of damage to the idea of "religion." So much so that many people now profess that they are "spiritual but not religious." I must admit to a

bit of annoyance at this proclamation- although, full disclosure, I too have felt this way when the institutional church fails in some way.

"Spirituality" involves the recognition of a feeling or sense or belief that there is something greater than myself, something more to being human than what I can see and hear, and that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine in nature. It is relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. Sounds like faith in Christ, to me.

What we, in the church, need to be about is creating a roof under which faith can grow and thrive- in us as individuals, and in the world around us. For many of us that means a physical building that provides a place for us to gather, to practice our faith and reach out to our community.

For others it means living out their faith in the words they say and the ways in which they treat other people- especially those who are outside of their "religious institution." It may be too late to re-claim the word, "religious," and maybe it doesn't matter anyway. What matters is that we really cannot separate "religious" and "spiritual," because our religious devotion to God is made real in the work of the Holy Spirit. In two weeks, we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit erupted with wind, power, and fire among the believers. That same Spirit continues to move in and through us, always encouraging us to grow in our faith, and to become the people we are created to be.

Like the Athenians, religious conversation seems to be very popular these days. Many want religion as long as they can talk about it but don't actually have to make a commitment or change their lives in any way. We want to control God, to shrink God down to our size, to unravel the mystery so it is manageable. We want a god who believes the things we believe, the way we believe them.

Creating our own god in stone or clay or paper or our own thoughts, or in another person allows us to have a god who is easily understood and manipulated. If we make our own god, we can make sure it fits into our world and we don't have to fit into its world. That seems so much easier, doesn't it?

There is a big difference between a god, or a religion, that offers to improve our lives on our terms and a God, a faith that calls us to repent and change our hearts and minds to be more like Christ. Maybe we can be spiritual **and** religious.

May our restless hearts find rest in God under this roof.

May it be so.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER- Mother's Day- 5.14.23

Mothering God, we greet you on this spring day with gratitude and joy. Funny how so many people freak out when we call you Mother when you do so much mothering in the biblical stories. You cherish and nurture your children, meet their needs, and provide tender loving care. You issue strong reprimands and challenges when necessary. You are compared to a mother who provides comfort for her child, a mother who will never forget her baby. You are compared to a mother bird who shelters her babies under her wings, a mother hen who gathers her chicks safely in her nest, a mother bear who will do anything to protect her cubs, a fierce mother eagle.

On this day we designate as "Mother's Day," we pray for those who long to be mothers and those who never were. We pray for birth mothers who answer the prayers of adoptive mothers. We pray for mothers whom we have lost to death or sickness or mental illness. We give you thanks for the mothers who have loved us all our lives and love us still. We pray for the women who have been like mothers to us- grandmothers, aunts, sisters, friends, teachers, mentors. We pray for those who never knew their mothers and those who wish they never had. We pray for those who are preparing to celebrate their first Mother's Day and those who have celebrated their last. We give you thanks for the women who mother other women's children and those who will grow up to do the same.

On this day to honor mothers let us honor all the women who bless our lives- in ways large and small. Mothering God, we ask your blessing upon them, strengthen them for their joyous and difficult tasks, let them know they are appreciate