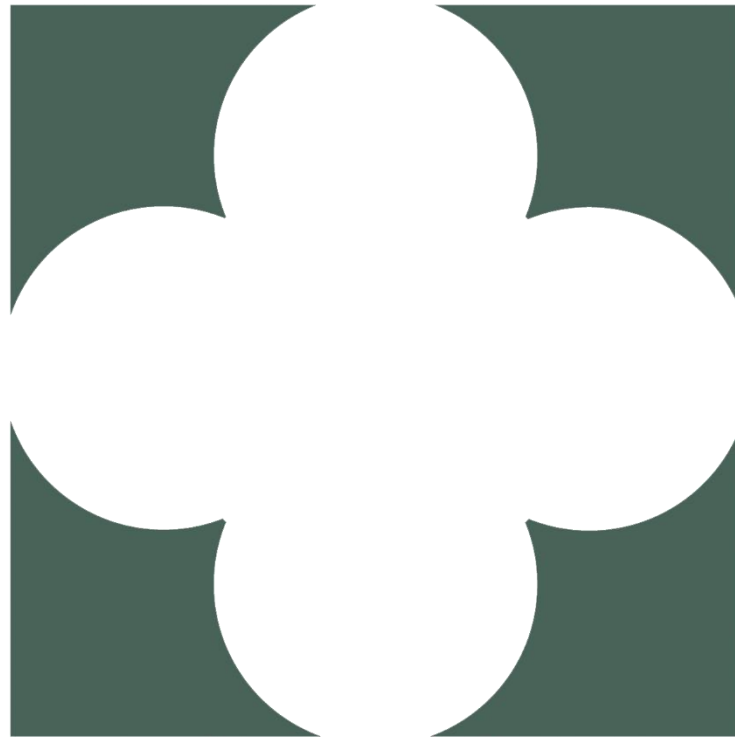


Make Known the Unknown God

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Acts 17:22-28

Before I launch into my message for today, I have an update on a sermon I preached several months ago. In March, I preached on the parable of the barren fig tree and how I could understand the exasperation of the owner who kept looking for figs year after year but found none. The owner of the fig tree told the gardener to cut it down, but the gardener begged the owner to give the tree one more chance. Well, I understood the frustration of the owner because I have had a kiwi tree for about 8 years that has never produced a kiwi. I am pleased to announce that this year, the kiwi plant flowered for the first time and kiwis are now growing.

In March, I too had threatened to cut down the kiwi plant, but grace abounds, or perhaps procrastination, and now we have fruit. So, sometimes life is not about our timing, but God's timing. Someone has been waiting on God to come through and fulfill God's promise to you for years. My friends, ***don't give up on God***. I don't know who needed to hear this today, but those who have ears, let them hear. Don't give up on God. Amen. Now let me hurry on to the message for today.

We are still in the book of Acts in the Christian scriptures. In our text the Apostle Paul is in Athens, Greece. Paul was on fire to share the message of Jesus' death and resurrection. He didn't care where he shared it, he just wanted everyone to hear the good news of Jesus, regardless of how dangerous it might personally be for him. Paul had a fire within him to invite others to know the love and freedom found in Christ Jesus.

Paul had already been run out of several cities for his bold, take-no-prisoners preaching style. He fled the cities of Phillipi, Thessalonica and Beroea for preaching a message that many didn't want to hear, and today we find him in Athens. Paul was waiting for his partners, Silas and Timothy, to join him before they all would continue to the next city, Corinth.

While waiting for his crew in ministry, Paul toured Athens. Athens was a city of sophistication and intellectual curiosity. Theologian Sean A. White wrote that the ***Athenians loved learning, and this insatiable desire drove their waking hours***. They learned new things, just because they could. Ahh, to have such lifelong curiosity.

As a port city, Athens was an economic powerhouse and a city of immense diversity. There were philosophers, artists, business owners and crafts people all over Athens. Paul noticed as he walked around the city that there were statues or shrines to various deities. These altars had been crafted by artisans, to resemble someone's imagination or understanding of that deity. Paul saw them everywhere. Athens was a theologically diverse city. A little bit of everything was worshipped in Athens.

As I first read this text and thought of idol worship, I was put off by the thought of worshipping anything other than the One who created the heavens and the earth. This week many of us marveled at the wonder of the universe through the James Webb Space Telescope. Yes, this is the Creator we worship. This is the One we worship. Our hearts rejoiced as we viewed the galaxies and recited:

In the beginning, ... the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

This is the God we serve, and we caught a glimpse of the Holy in those telescope pictures. What a mighty God we serve!

But, if we are honest and look at our culture and society, we might be surprised by what this country really worships. There is a difference between what we worship and going to church. What is worshiped in this country? Consider the second amendment. The idolatrous reverence to the second amendment puts semi-automatic guns in the hands of teenagers even before they can legally buy a beer. Military grade weapons have no place in this country other than in the hands of military personnel. Amen somebody.

Perhaps another one of our idols is consumerism. More is not always better. Yet even as we teeter on the brink of a recession, some of us still have daily deliveries from Amazon. Say amen for your neighbor. I was in shock when I went to the Mall of America. Right there in Minneapolis was a shrine to consumerism. You could get lost in there and never find your car or your way out! Some worship the almighty dollar and believe you can never be too rich or too thin. I say yes you can, to both.

And then we have public personalities that are idolized—entertainers, athletes, and even some politicians are lifted up way beyond their worth. What's that about? It is one thing to admire those who work hard and achieve their goals. It is another thing to blindly follow another, setting aside common sense and reason, embracing violence, and dismissing the rule of law. The insurrection and domestic terrorism of January 6, 2021, was the result of idol worship.

Some in this country even worship at the altar of Christian nationalism. The Christian faith is put on a pedestal, but there is no actual desire to practice the way of Jesus. There is no desire to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, provide shelter for

the unhoused, or care for babies after they are born. Those who worship at the altar of Christian nationalism, only use Christianity as a tool of oppression, control, and violence.

So, I can agree with Paul, as I look at the times in which we live, there are deities and altars all around us too. Before we get self-righteous about the idol worship in Athens, we need to critique our own country's worship practices.

The folks of Athens were concerned about covering all the bases. They even had an altar to the unknown God. Sean A. White wrote in *Feasting on the Word* that the Athenians were “**respectfully recognizing any erroneously overlooked deity.**” In the event there was some deity that they left out, they didn't want the wrath of that deity to rain down on them. So, they built an altar to the unknown God.

Paul was excited to see the altar to the unknown God because he **knew** that God. Paul knew that God who could not be captured or described by wood, stone, silver or gold. The unknown God is the God who is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. The unknown God is the God who gives life and meaning. The unknown God offers forgiveness and love, and purpose, and tells us to go do likewise. The unknown God is not served by human hands as if God needs us to supply God's need. No, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof the world and those who dwell therein.

We know this unknown God, who makes a way out of no way. Who heals when the doctors have given up on us and who gives us second, third, and fourth chances and more when needed. We know this God who tells us not to give up when it feels like there is no justice for women, lgbtq+ folks, people of color, or the environment. We know this God.

We know this God whose grace is sufficient and blesses us beyond our worth. We know this God who holds us in the midnight hour when the pain of a broken heart is excruciating, and we feel all alone. We know this God. For it is in the image of this God that we are wonderfully and marvelously made. We know the unknown God, for it is in this God that we live, move, and have our being.

And it is our job to tell the world about the awesome love of the God we know. The God we serve is not about judgement and exclusion, but about community and hope, justice, and love. If we don't share this God with our neighbors, how will they know? Paul told everyone about Jesus' death and resurrection, and he told everyone about the power of the Spirit.

As we find our way through this season of transition, job one is still to tell the good news no matter what. We don't have to make up stories about the unknown God. All we have to do is tell our stories, our authentic stories, all our different stories, about how God has shown up for us. Jesus said, if I be lifted up, I will draw all people unto me. We don't have to worry about membership numbers. We just have to tell our stories. Make known the unknown God. And all God's people will be blessed. And all God's people said, amen.