

God is Near

Acts 17:22-31

Like so many in higher education, living in a center of intellectual pursuits, the Athenians "would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). They loved learning, and this insatiable desire drove their waking hours. Especially in religion, they hungered for more and determined to leave no stone unturned. Perhaps the Athenians were superstitious people—people who covered all their bases by erecting a shrine "to an unknown god," just in case they had missed a god in the creation of their pantheon of deities. Perhaps they were sophisticated enough to know that there were gods or dimensions of deity that would always extend beyond the human capacity to know.

Having just been run out of Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea; Athens was new territory for Paul, a university town, a great seat of learning, sophisticated philosophizing, and religious curiosity. Upon entering the city, Paul noted the expanse of their religiosity, an expanse indicative of a much deeper existential restlessness. He saw a city stuffed with idols, and he described her residents as "religious in every way" (17:16, 22). A source of pride for those who considered themselves religious, the Athenian pantheon pointed toward a yawning left in the wake of heartfelt spiritual pursuit. Although they were religious, they remained uncertain and failed to find the rest for which they longed.

Rather than dismantling the religions of the Athenians, Paul affirmed their quest. Despite their highly structured way with the gods, they knew there was more. Creating space for "the unknown god," maybe they simply placated the Divine, as if to ask forgiveness for their omission. Maybe their spiritual senses drove them beyond the identified deities toward that which could truly satisfy, and yet remained just beyond

reach. Without hesitation, Paul declared, I know this God, and this God created and sustains heaven and earth (vv. 23, 25). Guardian over the space and time of your earthly pilgrimage, this God set your life in motion to assure that your sojourn would be a journey home. Groping and searching, you will remain restless until you find your rest in him (vv. 24-27).

Paul urged the Athenians to listen to their own poets, who knew of the nearness of this one yet named. "In him we live and move and have our being," Paul said, and in him we discover our own divine heritage (v. 28). Beginning with Jesus and the resurrection (v. 18), Paul stirred their curiosities, and the strangeness of his message elicited a request for clarification. For the first time, the unnamable had been named, but in no sense, as Anne Graham Lotz declared, could Jesus simply be lined up alongside the other gods as if he were just one of the boys. So long as the allegiances of the Athenians could be divided and compartmentalized among the various deities responsible for their well-being, a spiritual pantheon would be enough, but with the identification of Jesus as the one who could make them whole, Paul introduced Jesus as the only way.

No longer did he merely affirm the Athenians in their spiritual quest. Suddenly, the polite nod to the unknown god was answered with the demand for repentance. In his commentary on Acts, Gerhard Krodel insists, "There comes a point when the Christian witness must speak of Christ's resurrection and its consequences and take the risk of being switched off by the partner in dialogue." Rather than merely adding Jesus to the myriad of gods and goddesses, Paul introduced him as the one before whom the entire world must give account. By virtue of the resurrection from the dead, Jesus determines the standards of righteousness and will judge the world accordingly (vv. 30, 31). It is no surprise that many laughed, while others suspected he might be right (17:32-34).

Two millennia later, our society resembles the Athenian pantheon. Most of us don't worship around golden altars, but our loyalties are equally divided, and among the gods

crowding our lives, Jesus' claims are equally disruptive and demanding. In a world where spirituality is defined as self-fulfillment, religion takes its place alongside other leisure activities. So long as time allows, we will pursue the higher life. We live in a world where there is a church, temple or mosque on every corner and we aren't even sure if there is a difference in what they preach and believe. We are not sure if people need an allegiance to Christ or are all religions equally true. **Sean A. White** However, as we confess in A Disciples Affirmation, "We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world's only Son ... who ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead."

So, where do each of us fit into this text? Are we the Athenians, who in our own restlessness, have retrieved "the unknown god" and entrusted those who consider themselves religious to name this deity as they will. Or are we like Paul who have been called to be evangelists. Paul knew his task was to spread the good news, and he was comfortable adapting the message to his audience. Above all he was concerned to be heard and understood. William Willimon suggests that "the church, rather than standing back from pagan religiosity, pointing our fingers in righteous indignation, should, like Paul in Athens, minister to their searching." Paul shaped his arguments to his audience—using his Jewish rabbinical training and deep-seated commitment to the one true God; his belief in Jesus as the Christ; his own dramatic conversion experience; and/or his passion for persuasion—his faith must have come through whenever he appeared on the scene and opened his mouth. Clearly some were drawn to his message; some were mildly irritated by his conviction, though impressed by what he had to say; and some were angry and alienated from his insistent arrogance in "explaining it all to them." In this text, he was dragged before the court of religious opinion in Athens to account for himself before the authorities.

Paul believed like Augustine: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." "God has made *us* so that instinctively *we long* for God. There is that in *us* which makes *us* grope in the darkness after God because *we are children* of God and kin to God." Following the thought of Seneca and Epimenides, Paul refers to God as the one in whom we "live and move and have our being" (v. 28). The universe is not separate from God but *in* God."

Christianity has often been willing to use other religious traditions in order to make the gospel intelligible to non-Christian cultures. Paul used Athenian openness to other religions at the same time he challenged that openness with his faith in the one true God. We live in a time when it is easy to say there is one God but there are many paths to God, that it does not matter what path you take as long as you take one. Paul did not believe this. What he did do with Athenian religious practice was to use it to point to the way, the truth, and the life as he understood it. His witness was respectful of the view of others, demonstrating insight into and understanding of other faiths; at the same time, he insisted on sharing the truth as he had come to know it through his own experience. Not only is this a model for witnessing to non-Christians; it is also a model for witnessing to those of no religious persuasion. **Randle R. (Rick) Mixon**

This text also reminds us, in our culture, like that of Athens, is a culture of many idols: consumer goods, military power, sex, and technology, to name just a few. Paul challenges us to be *determined, adaptive witnesses*. Like Paul, we can adapt quickly and decisively to the culture and subcultures around us in order faithfully to communicate the good news. Rather than running from the dominant culture or accommodating that culture, we need to consider what it means to witness in such a situation. If we take our cue from Paul, we will first learn to listen carefully to the culture, hearing deep within it aspects of the ways people are seeking and searching for the one true God. Paul looked around him and saw not only idols, but what was *inscribed* on them. He learned how to read carefully the signs of religious problems and

possibilities within the dominant culture. Beyond paying attention, however, Paul *looked for openings* into the hearts of the people he sought to reach with the message of Christ's resurrection. Note that he did not weigh in immediately with critique, but embodied intellectual and spiritual *hospitality*. There is a spirit of welcome in the way Paul communicated his message. He acknowledged whom he was talking with, granted them their own creative powers of thought and invention, and invited them to go further in their thinking with him. Finally, Paul was *bold*. Proclaiming foreign divinities in this manner could have gotten Paul into a lot of trouble, as it did Socrates and others before him. The assertion that Christ, crucified and resurrected, is in fact God's final answer to all forms of human longing was a dangerous, and some would say reckless, strategy. Nonetheless, such boldness is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian witness. Paul did not water down his message, becoming lukewarm in his commitment to Christ. He asserted boldly what he believed, no matter the consequences.

Paul also challenged us to be *thoughtful witnesses*. This is one of the great pictures of sharp, articulate, intellectually tuned witness in the New Testament. Although these verses are clearly part of a longer speech that Paul would have delivered, it is clear from the outset that Paul has taken the time to think through his circumstances and to apply that thinking where he found himself. This suggests that we too might sharpen our abilities to think through our own idols and their evangelical and theological possibilities. It is one thing simply to lambaste all idolatry, and another to think carefully about what a particular form of idolatry represents in terms of human aspiration, and to identify theological and evangelical possibilities within this aspiration. For instance, the idolatry of consumerism, considered carefully, could indicate a deep desire for future fulfillment: consumers are always pursuing the "next best thing." In order to think about God within this framework, we need to place God within the context of the human desire for future fulfillment. In what sense does God in Jesus Christ meet our deepest desires for human fulfillment and wholeness? On the other

hand, an idolatry such as military power suggests another theological and evangelistic framework: if we think carefully about this idolatry, the goal is not fulfillment but *security*, achieved through the use of power and violence. Placing the God of Jesus Christ at the center of this human aspiration leads us to think more clearly about how God in Jesus Christ provides our true security in this world.

Finally, Paul challenges us to *trust God's Spirit in all things*. This story reminds us that it is God who makes the first move toward us, creating us and giving us all of our own creative powers. Our good gifts from God, point us toward God. Creation carries God's imprint. Much of the art and creative productivity in this world, at its deepest level, is expressive of the *Spiritus Creator*, God's ever-creating Spirit present within all creative process. Rather than shunning this creative potential, Paul recognizes it all around him and celebrates it as something that could potentially open us to the God who wants to be known in Jesus Christ. We can have what John McClure called "doxological living," in which we are thankful for all of the gifts around us, and are always looking for and finding in all human endeavors the unknown God and the desire to know more about that God. **John S. McClure**

Pascal described an "infinite abyss" within the soul of every person reserved for God alone. One challenge is to say to those around us, "We see your spiritual hunger. Might we offer sustenance from our rich store of spiritual resource?" Another challenge is to find the imagery and language that allow us to enter another's world in order to speak our truth honestly, respectfully, and effectively. God is near because it is in God that we live and move and have our very being. Amen.