

The God You Are Seeking

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22-31

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

This is the sixth Sunday of Easter. By now we are fully aware of the resurrection of Jesus. Mary Magdalene has told us...Peter has preached sermons about it...we have seen the amazing response to the resurrection story on the Day of Pentecost...we have seen how the young church worshipped and shared...we have been amazed by how the disciples looked back and realized they had seen the God of the Universe reflected in the words and actions of His Son Jesus. This week we learn of a new biblical witness...Paul, former persecutor of the young church, but now one of its most dedicated witnesses. Paul, not an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, and not a witness to the people brought up in the Jewish faith, brings to his task his education in both the Hebrew and Greek literature and his zeal for his work.

Paul may have felt some anxiety, having just been driven out of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea. Athens was new territory for him, a university town, a great seat of learning, sophisticated philosophizing, and religious curiosity. His primary calling was as an evangelist. 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. He 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 his passion for persuasion.

Living in a center of intellectual pursuits, the Athenians understood the leisure of educational pursuits, in which everyone "would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" ([Acts 17:21](#)). They loved learning, and this limitless desire drove their waking hours. Especially in religion, they hungered for more and determined to leave no stone unturned. Upon entering the city, Paul noted the expanse of their religiosity, an expanse indicative of a much deeper restlessness. He saw a city abounding with idols, and he described her residents as "religious in every way" ([17:16](#), [22](#)). They even erected an altar "to an unknown god" ([v. 23](#)). Perhaps the Athenians were superstitious people – people who covered all their bases by erecting a shire "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. A source of pride for those who considered themselves religious, the Athenians had a heartfelt pursuit of what we would call spirituality. For though they were religious, they remained uncertain and failed to find the rest for which they longed.

Paul, alone in Athens, a solitary witness, once again trying to be faithful in yet another strange and complex situation. So, what do we learn from Paul about

witnessing? First, we learn Paul was a determined and adaptive witness. What will it take for us, like Paul, to adapt quickly and decisively to the culture and subcultures around us in order to faithfully communicate the good news? Rather than run from the dominant culture or accommodate to that culture, we might 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. What does this listening entail? For one thing, we can learn to *pay attention* to details. Paul looked around him and saw not only idols, but what was *inscribed* on them. He learned how to read carefully the signs of 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 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.

Second, Paul was a thoughtful witness. This is one of the great pictures of sharp, articulate, intellectually tuned witness in the New Testament. It is clear from the outset that Paul has taken the time to think through his circumstances and to

apply that thinking where he finds himself. This suggests that we too might sharpen our abilities to think through our own idols and their evangelical 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, one we have experienced firsthand with the hoarding of toilet paper, hand sanitizer and meat in recent day. Considered carefully, consumerism 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 would 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 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 the witness to think more clearly about how God in Jesus Christ provides our true security in this world. In the same way we can view our idols of sex, power, technology and countless other things that we believe will give us fulfillment. This kind of on-the-ground thinking is the cornerstone of thoughtful witness and is one of the most helpful insights in this story.

Basile Pascal described an "infinite abyss" within the soul of every person reserved for God alone, and centuries earlier Augustine confessed, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Before the Areopagus, Paul acknowledged the wellspring out of which the array of worship poured. Rather than dismantling the religions of the Athenians, he affirmed their quest for the ground of being. Despite their highly structured way with the gods,

they desired more. Creating space for "the unknown god," maybe they simply pacified the Divine, as if to ask forgiveness for their omission. Maybe their spiritual sensibilities 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 sensed 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 produced 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. No longer did Paul 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.

Third we learn to trust God's Spirit in all things. This story teaches us that it is God who makes the first move toward us, creating us and giving us all of our own creative powers. Although the products of our labor present us with multiple opportunities to make potentially idolatrous choices, they nonetheless come from God *and* can become an opportunity to seek the God who wants to be known as

our Creator. Not all the things of this world have to be idols; some can be good gifts from God, pointing us toward God. Although creation surely falls short of revealing everything about God, it does carry God's imprint. Much of the art and creative productivity in this world, at its deepest level, is expressive of God's ever-creating Spirit. 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 are to be thankful for all of the gifts around us and are to always look for and find in all human endeavors the unknown God and the desire to know more about that God. **John S. McClure**

Two millennia later, our multicultural and multi-religious context resembles the Athenian pantheon. Apart from the ornamental worship around golden altars, our loyalties are equally divided, and among the gods crowding our lives, Jesus' claims are equally disruptive. **Sean A. White** The challenge is to say to those around us, "We see your spiritual hunger. Might we offer sustenance from our rich store of spiritual resource?" The 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. When we are fully rooted and grounded in God, so centered in our own experience of the Christian story, we cannot keep from sharing it! **Randle R. (Rick) Mixon** We want to share with you the God you are seeking. You will find him in the resurrected one, in Jesus the Christ!

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