

## Searching for the Unknown God

Acts 17:16-34

June 4, 2023

Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

We just concluded one of the most joyful Vacation Bible Schools I can ever remember, and a big thanks to everyone who helped make it happen. I had the pleasure of doing the storytelling with the little kids, which is always an adventure and sometimes tougher than most of my seminary classes. It's hard to teach the kids about Palm Sunday when they're more interested in telling me about what they found that morning in their belly button.

But, believe it or not, that's not the toughest audience I've ever had as a pastor. While I was in seminary, a friend asked if I would come speak to a group of people who were apathetic to the idea of religion, sometimes to the point of hostility. I was filled with the invincibility and arrogance of an untested seminary student, so of course I agreed to take on this challenge. And who was my audience? The local gathering of the Cynical Atheists Association? The Indianapolis chapter of the Satan Lovers' Society? Worse. It was a group of high school freshmen.

I knew I was in trouble when the first question was, "Why does the Bible say sex is bad?" Hmm. How do you explain that the Bible doesn't say that without giving the group permission to be fruitful and multiply? The questions only got more difficult from there. I remember trying to straddle the line between being true to my faith while still speaking the language of the people to whom I was talking.

That's the same line Paul is walking today in our scripture. On his journey to start new churches, Paul winds up in Athens. Paul has some time to kill while he waits on his buddies Silas and Timothy to catch up, so decides to soak in some of the local culture. After all, Athens was a cosmopolitan city, the center of Greco-Roman culture and intellectualism. This was the home of Aristotle and Plato. This was the location of the Parthenon and numerous other temples and hundreds of statues.

But Paul quickly moves from sightseeing to seething. The passage tells us Paul was "deeply distressed" by all the idols he saw around him because they violated his Jewish sensibilities. After all, the first two commandments say "Thou shalt worship no other gods before me," and "Thou shalt not bow down to graven images," and both were being broken in plain sight. So, Paul is faced with quite a conundrum. What do you do when you are immersed in a culture that goes against your beliefs?

Paul had a couple choices. He could just clam up and deal with it, not make a fuss, but that wasn't really Paul's nature. Or, he could put up a billboard outside the Parthenon that said, "You're going to Hell...unless you follow Jesus!" but the Athenians probably wouldn't take too kindly to that. So, Paul chooses the middle road by engaging the local residents in conversation. Acts tells us that Paul goes to the agora, the Greek marketplace which served as the social hub, and strikes up a conversation with some of the local philosophers about their religion.

But not everyone is impressed with what Paul had to say. Some of the crowd called Paul "babbler," which started a centuries-long tradition of preachers being accused of that. He was ridiculed for proclaiming foreign divinities, which technically he was. But his persistence and his persuasiveness got Paul a hearing at the Aeropagus, which was the location of the ruling senate in Athens. Basically, he was taken to the local courthouse, not to be put on trial, but because he was a person of interest.

Paul proceeds to give one of the best examples of a persuasive speech I've ever seen. I taught Public Speaking for several years, and Paul hits all the checkpoints that make for a good persuasive speech. He establishes common ground, complimenting the Greek for their visible commitment to religion. He brings in the local culture by referencing the Statue to an Unknown God. He uses their own logic by appealing to their knowledge of creation and belief in the natural power of the divine. Instead of citing Hebrew scripture to them, which would have been completely lost on this non-Jewish crowd, he quotes Greek poets to make his point. He then says that the true God is bigger than any human-made statue and – here's where he closes the sale – he says knows who this unknown God is, in the form of Jesus Christ. Bam! That's an A+ persuasive speech right there.

Was he successful in persuading his audience? Not entirely. We're told Some people scoffed. A few people were converted. And some said, "We will hear you again about this." When you consider the circumstances in which Paul was preaching and the simmering hostility toward his views, a hostility that would only be rivaled by a classroom full of high school freshmen, I'd say Paul did a pretty good job. "We will hear you again about this" is sometimes the best response we can hope for.

Imagine how different things would have been if Paul had decided to stay in the synagogue and not engage the locals in dialogue. It would have been a lot more comfortable for Paul to say, "If they want to hear what I have to say, they can come to me." It was much riskier for Paul to walk into the center of the agora and start conversing with the Epicureans and the Stoics. But you're not going to catch any fish by casting your line into a swimming pool. No, in order to catch fish, you have to go where the fish are.

The interesting thing to note is that when Paul ventured into the foreign territory of the Greco-Roman culture, he found they were looking for the same thing the Jews were looking for in the synagogue. Their impulse to worship was right even if the objects of their worship were wrong. Paul says that God made it so people would search for God, even grope about before they find God. I love the image of people groping for God. There's a sense of urgency there, as if looking for a light switch in a dark room. The Jews, the Jesus followers, the Greeks – they were all groping for God.

This pursuit has gone on for centuries. Around the year 400, St. Augustine wrote in his book Confessions, "You have made yourself for us, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Since time began, we've been searching for the unknown God. And we're still looking. It's like we have this God-shaped hole inside of us that can only be filled by one thing. Today, people have all kinds of things at their disposal that they use to fill the God-shaped hole inside of them, but no matter how much materialism or alcohol or Tik Tok or busyness you pour into it, it cannot be filled. It can only be filled by knowing God. Paul says to the Athenians that he knows this unknown God, he knows the one thing that can fill the God-shaped hole within us. That's the same message we need to be sharing today. That's the hope and meaning people are groping for.

We are very much like Paul. We are believers in a world that doesn't believe, or at least doesn't believe in a way shines God's light and offers God's inclusive love. So, our job, then, is to introduce people to this God for whom they are searching. But we can't do that in our own language. Crusades and street-corner sermons don't work anymore. I was at Pride Fest downtown last year, and there was a guy with a megaphone and a hand-written sign telling everyone why they were going to Hell and needed to repent. Want to guess how many convents

he made? In order to shine Jesus' light in this world, we have to speak the world's language, and that language is not judgment and condemnation, but love and diversity and acceptance.

That's one of the beautiful things about our Vacation Bible School this year. I would guess a majority of the kids who attended don't go to Crestwood. They go to other churches, or more likely, don't go to church at all. And we had the opportunity to welcome their kids in, to love on them, to play games with them and do crafts with them, to shine Jesus' light on them. And I guarantee that we'll see them again, maybe sitting next to you in worship one Sunday. We go out there in order to invite them in here so they can experience the love and grace of God.

In order for the Bible to be a living book, the gospel should sound different every place it's shared. That doesn't mean the message changes, but the delivery must be enfolded in a way that speaks to the culture and the people immersed in it. Whether it's through a post, a text, or a face-to-face conversation, we have good news to share! As Paul tells the Athenians, the Unknown God they've been groping for is not far from each one of them. We can go into the stores, the little league fields, the fitness centers, the coffee shops around us and show through our words and actions that we know this God, and it has made a difference in our lives. We do that because people are watching us to see if all this religion stuff really makes a difference. They are groping for meaning, for purpose, for a reason to believe. Do we live in such a way that people want to know more about the hope and joy and peace we show?

I got a text a few years ago – from my 87-year-old grandmother. You don't know how miraculous this was. Why did she go to the trouble of learning how to send a text message? After 87 years, hadn't she learned enough? It was important enough for her to stay connected with her family. If we believe enough in the importance of relationships, we'll be willing to learn a new language, even if there are parts of it that make us uncomfortable. Does that mean that all of us have to go out and learn how to text and tweet and use the Google Machine and surf the interwebs? Not at all. But what we are called to do is not limit the ways we imagine the gospel can travel just because we may not be comfortable with it. God continues to do a new thing.

Christians often get a bad rap for being simplistic, anti-science, superstitious, exclusionary. Many people grew up in churches like this, and because of that they have no interest in stepping foot in here. The church comes across as threatened and threatening. But that's not who we are. So, do we sit here and wait for them to come running back to us? Or do we go after them, into the cultural marketplaces, to let them know God is just as present with them there as God is with us here? St. Francis said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words." So, let's go out and preach the good news we know. Granted, some may scoff at us. Some may call us "babblers" or worse. But some will say, "We will hear you again about this." If we can do that, I trust God will take it from there.