

SERMON: Making An Unknown God Known

TEXT: Acts 17:22-31

I have some friends from elementary school who still get together every year for a Christmas party. I haven't been able to attend in a long time because they are all still in Minnesota, and I'm a little busy with work during the Christmas season. Anyway, one year when I was there, a friend was telling us about her two little boys who were about 8 and 6 years old at the time. The whole family was going to a wedding or a baptism or some event at a church, and when they entered she noticed a painting of Jesus on the wall. She pointed it out to her boys and asked them if they knew who that was. "George Washington?" they guessed. She laughed and laughed, thinking it was terribly funny that her boys didn't even know who Jesus was.

I didn't think it was funny at all. I thought it was sad. Those boys are grown men now, and I wonder if they ever learned any more about Jesus or who he was or what he did. It's actually hard to believe. I mean, even if you never open a Bible or darken the door of a church, most people have seen A Charlie Brown Christmas, and Linus tells the story of Jesus' birth, saying, "That's what Christmas is all about." How does a person get through life not knowing about God?

However, “According to the 2014 *The State of the Bible* report by Barna Group and American Bible Society, [81 percent] of U.S. adults said they consider themselves highly, moderately, or somewhat knowledgeable about the Bible. Yet less than half (43 percent) were able to name the first five books of the Bible. The statistics are similar to the previous 2013 report which also showed that only half [of Americans] knew that John the Baptist was not one of the 12 apostles. (Lillian Kwon, www.christianpost.com, June 16, 2014)

In our scripture lesson from the Book of Acts, we heard Paul speaking to the men of Athens. He first complimented them on being “extremely religious”, getting on their good side so they would listen to him. Then, he noted their objects of worship and the inscription on an altar reading, “To an unknown God.” Paul contends that the god they call unknown actually exists and can be known. “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, 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, 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.”

I think we are all looking for something or someone to worship, something for which to give our lives, someone for whom to live our lives, someone in whom “we live and move and have our being.” I think we are all looking for someone like the Advocate, promised by the risen Christ so that we would never be alone. We are all looking for someone to abide in us, who inspires life in us, who loves us unconditionally and wants our love and full commitment in return.

But instead of closing our eyes and searching our souls, we get distracted by tangible things that are shiny, expensive, attractive, and strong like idols of gold, or silver, or stone. Or we create our own objects of worship, images “formed by the art and imagination of mortals.” It is only when those things lose their shine or their value, when the world lets us down and nothing seems to be going our way, when we begin to search – even grope – for an unknown God.

Theologian Kathleen Norris wrote about her own search: *My initial ‘seeking’ was done of necessity in a small, traditional Presbyterian church in the isolated town where I live. And also in the Benedictine monasteries of the region. I’m grateful that I didn’t have more choice than that, because given my emotional needs at the time, I would have found it confusing. I have often been asked, usually*

by urban people, why I sought out a Christian monastery rather than a Buddhist one. The answer is geography, of course; I would have had to travel more than five hundred miles. And I didn't have the money. For me, the result of what the world might consider deprivation has been a happy one. More or less forced to take a good look at where I was, and take advantage of what was available locally, I was also forced to find sustenance within my own religious heritage. And I found it much more various, rich, and nourishing than I had ever imagined.

*Over time, I have learned two things about my religious quest: First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has myriad ways of finding me. Second, that my most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I become convinced that God is absent from my life, others have a way of suddenly revealing God's presence. When I think of how the process works, I recall the scene at Calvary, as depicted in John's Gospel, when Jesus sees his mother standing near a disciple. 'Woman,' he says to her, 'here is your son.' [And he says] to his disciples, 'Here is your mother' (John 19:26-27). It is through Jesus Christ, and the suffering Christ at that, that God seeks us out and gives us to each other.' (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, pp. 293-294)*

Too often, we are ignorant of the fact that God is not far from each one of us. And we need to repent of our ignorance. Though Paul's speech began with a conciliatory tone, he works his way toward a stricter point, saying: "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

You know, that word 'ignorance' means that we have a lack of knowledge or information. It, too, seems conciliatory. *Aw, shucks, you can't help it; you just didn't know any better.* But it just occurred to me recently that the related word 'ignore' indicates a more intentional lack of knowledge. It's not that we haven't been offered plenty of opportunities to know God, it's that we haven't bothered to take advantage of them. We've had better things to do.

At the same time, there are many people who don't know any better. Like my friend's little boys, there are people who don't know about the love of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we have a responsibility to them. And we have a responsibility to God.

But how do we make an unknown God known? The easy answer is love. But love is easier said than done. Just as showing our love for Jesus by obeying

his commandments. Another pastor suggested, “Well, we look to the Holy Spirit for guidance. In John’s Gospel the Holy Spirit is also called the Spirit of truth, our Advocate, the One who teaches and guides, reminds, encourages, strengthens and testifies. Apparently, we require a lot of help if we are to follow Jesus’ commandments, especially the greatest of them. Love may be all we need, but if we are to love as Jesus commands, we need divine intervention to actually do it.”

(Jill Duffield, “Isn’t love all we need?” Looking into the lectionary for May 21, The Presbyterian Outlook, 5/15/2017)

We don’t need to go out on the corner and become street preachers to any who pass by. But we can be more open to opportunities, we can appeal to the Holy Spirit to show us where and when and how we are called to make our God known. And we can trust the Holy Spirit to give us the courage we need to do it.

When we see people searching and groping for something to believe in, for someone they can trust, for love that never fails, may we point out the God who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. May the Holy Spirit abide in us, teach us, guide and direct us to repent of our ignorance, to love as we have been loved, to obey Christ’s commandments, and to show and tell the world that our life

depends on him. MAKING AN UNKNOWN GOD KNOWN. May we strive to answer this call, to the glory of God!

AMEN.