

“Making Known an Unknown God”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden for FUMC
Grand Junction, 4th Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2022

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/worship-services>

Scripture Texts:

Acts 17:16-34a [NLT]

OPENING

- As with last week, there is so much in this passage that we could hone in on and benefit from exploring. I’ve gotten very comfortable with the knowledge that I am never going to fully plumb the depths of the Scriptures; there will always be either:
 - (1) More to the text than I knew about – either culturally, historically, socially, theologically, whatever...or
 - (2) A fresh insight into the meaning of the text that the Holy Spirit brings me. It isn’t that the text changes, but I have changed from the last time I studied a given passage – grown, shifted in my perspectives, experienced more of God and of life – so that the Living Word of God who is Christ has something else to share with me.

And the truth is, at least to me, anyone who purports to have mastered the “full meaning of the text” is someone to be leery of, not impressed with.
- So, I approach this time of reflection on the Scriptures with you this morning with a lot of joy, offering you what I believe God has offered me.

You can do with that what you will because I believe the Holy Spirit addresses each of us in our uniqueness and, as Jesus said in John 16:13, leads us into all truth.

SERMON THOUGHTS

- So, the first thought I want to share with you this morning is that I am taking a sympathetic approach to the Athenians as I reflect on this passage. I am **not** responding to them this time with a sense of self-righteousness, i.e., scolding, critical, judgmental, etc., attitude but with understanding.

I say “this time” because I haven’t always responded with such sympathy. Like many, I too have gotten caught up in what is a narrow, superior-minded but ultimately fear-based understanding of “the only right way” to believe or practice faith.

→ Paul himself approached the Athenians with understanding, unless you think we wasn’t being genuine. His opening statement must have softened hearts and opened ears toward him. He didn’t jump in with criticism; he complimented them on their religiosity.

→ Who are we to respond with anything less? After all, weren’t they just living out both Pascal’s “infinite abyss” and Augustine’s “restless heart”? [*Feasting...*, Theol. Persp., 474] “Rather than dismantling the religion of the Athenians, Paul affirmed their quest for the Ground of Being.” [*Ibid.*]
- Another Thought: The Athenians reflected the complicated relationship in which all non-Jews, i.e.,

“Gentiles” – at one time US included! – stand with respect to the true God: They don’t know this God, but they honor God nevertheless. [*Feasting...*, Exeg. Persp., 477] Can that be said today?

- Only after responding in an understanding manner toward them did he say as much as, “Let me share with you something you may not have thought of before... Give me a chance to explain to you what I know of the God you describe as ‘unknown’.”
- Then followed his amazing teaching on the nature of God as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

TO THE SCRIPTURES

Paul drew his Greek hearers in with two key concepts, both from Greek poets:

1. Acts 17:28a “For in Him...” Share the story of the “deliverance of Athens from the plague” from the life of the Greek poet / seer, **Epimenides**. A really important illustration for context...[Source = <https://isthatinthebible.wordpress.com/2014/09/16/lying-cretans-and-unknown-gods-allusions-to-epimenides-in-the-new-testament/>]

2. And Acts 17:28b “For we, too, are his offspring”, per the poet **Aratus** [*Ibid.*]

With that, Paul demonstrated the foolishness of the Greek idols made “of gold or silver or stone”. It’s like he said, “If you believe we are God’s offspring, how does it make any sense to depict God as being fashioned of human hands

using such earthly materials?!” Brilliant, really.... Paul engaged the Athenians at their place of vulnerability: reason and intellect.

SERMON THOUGHTS

Finally, he came around to Jesus Christ, the One whom God appointed to judge the world in righteousness and the One whom God, as a sign of His endorsement, raised from the dead. It was incredible!

Some scoffed and dismissed Paul at this point – the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:32a). The late Gerhard Krodel, German-born Lutheran Biblical theologian sided with Paul: “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.”

[*Feasting...*, Theol. Persp., 476].

Others were much more open-minded and curious and desired to hear more at another time (Acts 17:32b). And many others believed, including a member of the Areopagus, Athens’ high governing Council [“Dionysius, the Areopagite” (Acts 17:34).]

And at that, Paul left them and went on to Corinth (Acts 17:33; 18:1), and the story of his missionary journey continues.

CONCLUSION

Paul was able to interact with the Athenians in this fashion because of the power and the depth...the fullness...of his conversion to and transformation in Christ. He **knew** the LORD! Like the stones along the

road on that first “Palm Sunday” that Jesus said would cry out if He silenced the crowds, Paul could never keep his intimate knowledge and experience of the love of God in Christ to himself. But neither did he share it in a way that mocked others’ faith – at least not with the Athenians according to today’s Scripture reading.

Ultimately, the reality of Jesus Christ, the Son of God crucified and risen, does demand an exclusive commitment on the part of the faithful. Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of the late Billy Graham and his wife, Ruth, observed of this passage: “For the first time the unnamable had been named, but in no sense, could Jesus simply be lined up alongside the other gods as if he were just one of the boys!” [*Feasting...*, Theol. Persp., 474].

→ In my opinion, this exclusivity and that of Krodel is best understood as a conclusion of one’s faith, not a condition others must accept before their embrace of Jesus as LORD. (*Unpack this a bit.*) God meets all of us where we are and leads us deeper into a commitment to Him. I think we forget that sometimes.

You and I are called to be witnesses of what God has done in and for us, not District Attorneys prosecuting others for their slowness to accept what likely took us some time to be able to profess.

Speaking of professions of faith, this is the perfect Sunday to join our voices with what the church has taught of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and a short list of essentials in what is called the “Nicene Creed”.

Whether you’re live streaming or here in the Sanctuary, let us as the Body of Christ, share this together with the conviction of the Apostle Paul:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty...

(*11 AM: into 🎵 “How Can I Keep from Singin’?”

REFERENCE

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 472-477.