

“To an Unknown God” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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TEXT: Acts 17:22-28 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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. 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, 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. 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.”

WE LIVE IN AN AGE of incredible scientific advancements. There’s genetic engineering, robotics, and information technology. The human genome has been mapped. Nano-technology is constructing miniscule machines that can deliver inter-cellular messages or make molecular level repairs. Astro-physicists have mapped the curvature of the universe, delved into black holes, listened to the echoes of the Big Bang. Scientific inquiry and experiment have revealed the “hows” and “whys” and “whats” never before known. We think we have a handle on how the universe works.

So why did the builders of the new Yankee Stadium spend five hours and \$50,000 digging through two feet of concrete last week? They did this to extract a David Ortiz Red Sox jersey that a zealous Red Sox fan secretly buried in the concrete floor of the visiting team’s dug out -- presumably to permanently “jinx” the new Yankee stadium. The story of the jersey finally came to light because another construction worker who had seen the shirt go into the slab got worried and confessed: “I don’t want to be responsible for sinking the franchise,” he said. The stadium, a 1.3 billion dollar project, was brought to a screeching halt because everyone believed in the jinxing power of a piece of cloth submerged down in a concrete floor in a locker room.

Superstition. Magical thinking. The power of the unknown, strong enough to make most of us “knock on wood,” throw spilled salt over our shoulders, read our horoscopes, always take notice of “Friday the 13th.” Everyone worships some sort of unknown god.

I think this is what was going on in Athens when the Apostle Paul arrived. The Greeks, for all their sophisticated thinking, were a highly superstitious people.

Little children have that special “blankie” or stuffed animal that magically imparts peace and serenity. Big corporations hire specialists to “feng shui” their work spaces. Musician George Michael bought John Lennon’s Steinway piano and ships it off to places that are in need of some kind of spiritual support: to New Orleans after Katrina; to Virginia Tech after the shootings.

And the Athenians had their altars to dozens of idols and gods. Indeed, at the Areopagus, the center for meeting and debate, there was even an altar to ‘an unknown god’. Apparently the Greeks wanted to make sure they covered all bases!

So here comes Paul, having already been accused of speaking of other divinities because he spoke of Jesus and the Resurrection, which the Greeks heard as two separate gods. He was called to explain himself. This time he took a different tact. "Men of Athens," he began, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown God.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

It seems that Paul was beginning to understand the complexities of a pluralistic world. Paul had drunk deeply of the well of salvation, had become addicted to the Water of Life, and his passion for Christ had made him a peddler of the same "spiritual high" which he had experienced. But he did not condemn the Greeks for their worship. There was no sledgehammer of verbal accusations, no "Shame on you, Athenians, for having so many gods," or "How can you possibly worship an ‘unknown’ God?" or "You claim to be philosophers and don’t know who God really is! Where are your brains?!"

No. Paul simply told them that this unknown god could indeed be known. He started with God as Creator, the Source of all life. He described our world and told how God guided history and is the One on Whom all life depends. The soul needs God as the earth needs the sun. God is all the hope our world has. "In God we live and move and have our being."

On Friday, Chris Keene and I were invited to join an interfaith interview by a reporter from Voice of America. We were specifically asked to speak about our Abrahamic House of Prayer, but the reporter first asked the group to talk among ourselves, as if we were at a meeting. The conversation recalled some of the Interfaith Meetings in recent months that had looked at how different faiths approach similar issues, and then we hemmed and hawed uncomfortably, until someone suggested holding the next discussion around the environment, around creation and stewardship, acknowledging that the world is of God and we are of God. Suddenly we were excited, talking so much we hardly noticed the reporter. We were absolutely united in our enthusiasm. Paul said we first glimpse God in the created world, and we shared that reality. Our interfaith group was living that out. In that moment we shared the feeling expressed by golfer Lee Trevino after lightning struck a tree very near to where he was standing. When asked what he thought in that moment, he replied, "I learned that when God wants to play through you had better let him."

Our quest for an interfaith center here at the Ministry is gaining in its vision, its grounding and its support. This may become reality. With Paul, we dream of a world in which all of the religious people can find a common meeting ground on issues such as war and peace, wealth and poverty, and inter-religious strife. We dream of shared worship space and a shared movement of the Spirit. But we still have much to learn about having the dialogues. So this sermon by Paul is significant for us. The path is opening for us to look closely at what we as Christians have to say to a pluralistic world.

We can readily acknowledge that we share a universal God-consciousness with most of the people of the world regardless of their formal religious affiliation. Paul’s speech to the Athenians was designed to get his audience thinking about that inner yearning for “something more,” that “groping” for the “unknown God.”

We Christians have particular belief. We claim that the unknown God has become known through Jesus. In interfaith conversation, we will be challenged to talk about our own particular good news. What about the fact that God became a human being on our behalf? The Incarnation is the injection of God into the blood-stream of humanity. It is the invasion by God into the soul. Through Jesus we have a closeness and a promise and a love that will ever be available through the power of the Spirit.

Jesus is as human as God can be without ceasing to be God and as divine as a human can be without ceasing to be human. We are not here to be receivers but givers, givers of love. Being a Christian is more than knowing about Jesus, it is knowing Jesus. It is rejected because he makes unacceptable demands. He is first our disturber then our comforter. He demands constant reordering of our priorities so that which we currently value becomes devalued. These are things we will need to learn to articulate in interfaith conversations. As we learn about other faiths, we will have to speak clearly about our own faith.

But Paul also warned them that there was a difference between religiosity and righteousness. The God who created the universe, who gave life to human beings, "does not live in shrines made by human hands" (v.24) and is not "an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals" (v.29). Idols of gold, silver, or stone will never contain God, and can never move beyond the "magical" to real faithfulness.

Even more than talking about our faith, we are invited by Paul, just as we were invited by Jesus, to live our faith rather than proselytize it. We have to understand it and both claim and explain it, but mostly we have to demonstrate it. Paul would applaud all who could stand as Martin Luther did at the Diet of Worms, and declare that his faith gave him his power: "Here I stand, I can do no other!" But I think he would also agree with the sentiment of Bill Clinton when he said, "I am not against Barak Obama, I am simply for Hillary."

We must never be against Judaism or Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism....But we can be for Christianity! In a society in which we are rapidly becoming a minority, we might well be called to be the good news instead of just declare it. If you want to see Christian God you ought to be able to get a glimpse in transformed lives.

That might be as simple as being kinder than we are inclined to be. A woman named Dorothy Pryse was listening to a Christian radio station as she drove to the grocery store one morning. A person was talking about kindness. He said, "I wonder how many of you are listening to me on your car radio and thinking of how you can be kind while driving?" Dorothy began thinking about what he was saying. First she let a car back out of a driveway into the roadway and got a lovely wave and appreciative smile. Then, at the grocery store she started pulling into an empty space at the same time another car turned in. Dorothy backed out and found another parking spot. As they both got out of their cars, the driver of the other car said, "I can't believe what you just did. Anyone else would have made me back out, probably with a loud horn". Dorothy explained what she had heard on the radio about showing love. The two women began talking. Dorothy discovered the woman had just moved into the area, didn't know anyone and was looking for a church. "I invited her to come to our church," Dorothy says, "and a strong friendship has blossomed from our chance meeting and a small act of kindness." A chance meeting changed someone's life and a friendship blossomed in the process. This happened because Dorothy was seeking to live out her Christian faith.

I had my own struggle with this when the reporter at that interfaith meeting ended up a full hour late. She was driving up from Millbrae and apparently turned onto the Bay Bridge by mistake. I was, frankly, annoyed and impatient – until a woman from Grace Cathedral said how hard it must be to get lost in a strange city, how terrible that reporter must be feeling, knowing we were waiting there. I was challenged to live more generously, more kindly

Paul challenges us to move deeper and deeper into our relationship with God. What would it take to move into the deeper premises, deeper promises of a biblical faith? What would it really mean if we truly "lived and moved and had our being" in the one true God?

Jesus said: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" And the one big commandment was, love one another. Well that applies to you and me as well. Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned" and he didn't. God gave us the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, to draw us closer to God, and inspire us to greater things. May it be so. Amen.