

# "Knowing the Unknown God"

Acts 17:16-31

May 29, 2011

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday Of Easter

As we celebrate Memorial Day this weekend and remember all the soldiers who gave their lives in service to our country, there are many reminders of the magnitude of this sacrifice. One is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The Tomb of the Unknowns (as it is officially known) contain the remains of soldiers from World War I, World War II, and the Korean War who cannot be identified. Despite the fact that there are more than 300,000 graves surrounding it, the Tomb of the Unknowns represents all soldiers who have died, especially those whose identity is not known.

The ancient city of Athens had something similar with regard to its religious life. It was a city full of idols – statues and temples dedicated to the hundreds of Greek gods which were worshiped. Yet, despite having all of these shrines, it was thought necessary to have one more altar: The Altar of the Unknown God. This altar was to represent any god which the Greeks might have missed in their pantheon of gods.

In our sermons during the Easter season, we've considered how the Church lives as Easter Christians. One of the most important activities of the early Church was proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. One of the challenges for the early Church was how to proclaim the Gospel to a world that was hostile to it. We think our world today is hostile to the Gospel, but I would say that the world in which the early Church existed was much more hostile. Yet they did not give up, but all the more boldly proclaimed that message. How did they do it?

Our text for today says that Paul was in Athens and that "his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." He was angry to see the blatant violation of the 1<sup>st</sup> and chief commandment in God's Law: You shall have no other gods. He was angry to see this sin. He was angry over the possibility of so many people separated from the true God through this deceit.

Are we likewise angry over the idolatry and sin of our day and age? Maybe this is our first problem with evangelism. We have become meek and accepting of our God's rivals. We have bought into the politically correct notion of tolerance and acceptance of other religious faiths. We have adopted the priorities and lifestyles of our culture, even when they are contrary to the will of God. Our city is full of idols, too: false religious beliefs, wealth, pleasure, technology, and so on. We are very accepting of these things. How will we ever have a passion for the Gospel if we are not equally passionate against the idols of our age? We need to be angry about the idolatry of the age and how it offends God.

Yet Paul did not let his anger keep him from speaking the Gospel, nor did it cause him to hide out in safe places with believers while he wrung his hands and complained about how bad the world was. He did not simply talk about the Gospel with believers in safe and friendly places. He took the Gospel out into the world. He talked about the Gospel with unbelievers in places that were not friendly and accepting – the Jewish synagogues, the marketplace, the academic halls where secular philosophers discussed philosophy.

One of our problems is that we keep the Gospel within these walls. We talk about the Gospel in this safe and friendly place. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, we need it. We need the forgiveness of sins and the comfort which the Gospel offer through Word and Sacrament. However, the people out there who willingly participate in the idolatry of this age or who have been deceived by it need the Gospel, too. We need to bring the Gospel from in here to out there.

It does not appear that Paul was afraid to speak. What did he say? He didn't share his faith nor did he talk about the church and what a friendly group of believers they were. He didn't invite people to come with him to the next gathering of believers. Paul simply talked about Jesus and the resurrection. In fact, he talked so much about Jesus and the resurrection that he was accused of being a preacher of foreign divinities: Jesus and Anastasia (the Greek word for resurrection). But, by sticking to the truth of the Gospel, rather than his faith or feelings; by proclaiming Jesus and the

resurrection, rather than the church, the people were interested in hearing what he had to say. They asked him to come and tell more about it.

We are often afraid to speak the Gospel to those who are hostile to it. It doesn't matter if you are a preacher or a parishioner, no one wants to be rejected. So, we talk a lot about personal faith – about what Jesus has done for me or about our feelings or about our congregation, instead of speaking about Jesus Christ and what He has done for the individual we are talking to. When we take the Gospel from in here to out there, we need to be talking about Jesus Christ and Him crucified and resurrected, rather than about ourselves or our feelings.

How Paul spoke of Jesus and the resurrection was simply masterful. Without changing the *content* of the Gospel, he shapes the message to fit the audience to whom he is speaking. He is speaking to two philosophical groups popular in that day: the Epicureans and the Stoics.

The Epicureans were atheists who believed the world came into existence through an evolutionary process. Life was not regulated by moral or spiritual interests, but by the gratification of the senses through various pleasures. There was no after life in this philosophy. At death, the soul dissolved and dissipated in the elements, ending its existence.

The Stoics were pantheists which meant everything was god and god was everything. Reason, not a revealed set of commandments, determined what was good and what was evil. At death, the soul was absorbed into god.

As you can see, a memorized outline is not going to work with these guys. Rather than trying to force his message down their throats, Paul seizes an opportunity when he sees the altar dedicated “to the unknown god.” Paul compliments their interest in religion and simply wants to tell them about something they have already shown an interest in by constructing this altar: a god they don't yet know.

Paul talks about “the God who made the world and everything in it.” This was directed against what the atheistic Epicureans believed. Paul talks about the “Lord of heaven and earth does not

dwelt in temples made by human hands” - a personal God who is distinct from creation. This was directed against what the Stoics believed – an impersonal god found in everything. He doesn’t quote the Bible, but quotes their own philosophers to establish that God gives us all that we have and that we are His children. He speaks a message directed specifically to his audience.

We often try to speak the Gospel as if there is a “one size fits all” method, a memorized outline of salvation with memorized Bible verses. We say the same thing to different groups of people and are surprised when people either are not interested or reject it. We need to know the culture around us and how they think. That’s been one of the reasons for the topic in our Adult Bible Class – *The Truth Project*. Know how they think so we know how to speak the Gospel message to them in a meaningful way.

Make no mistake about it: it is still the content that is the most important thing of all. After Paul has been angered by all the idols he sees; after he has waded into the culture and community and engaged them; and after he has listened to them and set up the message in a way designed specifically for them, he gives them the content.

He calls for repentance from sin, something unpopular to the pleasure seeking Epicureans who wanted no right or wrong and to the reason-based Stoics who wanted to determine their own right and wrong. Paul speaks of a day of judgment by a man God has appointed – Jesus Christ, something neither group wanted to hear. All of this is pretty bleak and heavily based on the Law.

But then Paul delivers the Gospel. There is hope and assurance God gives, but it’s not based on our ability to know Him through philosophy or be accepted by Him through good behavior. The hope and assurance comes from Jesus’ resurrection from the dead which we are specifically celebrating at this time and which is our chief reason for celebrating every Sunday throughout the year.

This message of Paul – repentance and judgment; acceptance and resurrection – is still the one people need to hear today and which we need to speak today. While we need to be familiar with

the culture and in the community, we cannot let the content be dictated by the culture nor affected by the community. We cannot be afraid to speak of sin to our culture of toleration and the non-judgmental people who inhabit it. We must call for repentance and warn people of the coming day of judgment when what we confess every Sunday will become a reality: “from thence [Jesus] will come to judge the living and the dead.”

The message of the resurrection must be boldly proclaimed as the answer to sin and the hope and comfort in the Day of Judgment. Resurrection means, first of all, there has been a death. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, has given His life as a payment for sin and a release from judgment. His resurrection proves that He is who He said He is: the eternal Son of God. His resurrection validates all that He has done: fulfilling the Law of God in our place and dying to forgive all our sins. His resurrection guarantees our future and the future of all who believe: life, not extermination, after death; personal joy and peace in heaven, not absorption into some vague deity.

That all sounds pretty “old school”. But Paul was pretty old school, too. What about results? We are very conscious about results in our world today. We want a message that “works” and converts all to faith in Jesus Christ. What happened to Paul? In the verses following our text, it says that “when they heard of the resurrection, some mocked.” Others wanted to hear more. And some came to faith and believed in Christ.

I think we can expect pretty much the same when we deliver this message. Some will mock us and we need to accept that. Some will want to hear more and we need to be ready to teach them. Some will come to faith and we need to be ready to accept them into our fellowship.

Many people today think that what happens in church – the programs, the forms of worship, a dynamic pastor, and so on – will cause people to be brought to faith and a relationship with God. While this may be true to a small extent, the better way is to bring the unknown God to our community – in our personal contact with unbelieving friends and family, at the Farmer’s Market, at the State Fair,

and so on. In doing so, the unknown god will become the known God, the believed God, and the saving God for many. Amen.