

The Unknown God

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The second scripture for this morning is from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, verses 22-33. I have a tortured relationship with Acts. It is usually attributed to the author of the gospel we call Luke, placing it at least 30 years after Paul the Apostle's own words were silenced. Some scholars double and even triple that time. There are gaps between Paul the Apostle's own words and the words the author of Acts puts in his mouth that you could drive a truck through. You could call Act's Interpretation of Paul, Al Paul. I do. I love this famous sermon, though, however questionably attributed to Paul. In fact, when I was sent the open dates for pulpit supply, I chose next Sunday before I looked at the lectionary. Seeing this passage assigned to today, I regretted my prompt reply, but I stayed silent. In less than a day, Larry called to ask if I could switch. Here I am! How about that? So please pardon me if I enjoy feeling a little extra "meant-to-be"-ness with this one.

Our story so far: Paul has been chased out of Thessalonica and has been waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens. Walking the city, he sees idols and statues everywhere, to gods of war, wealth, and political power, gods of every imaginable sphere of human concern, and, recalling God's commandment to NOT build these things, he gets pretty worked up. He heads to the synagogue, itching for a fight, where he attracts the notice of a group of Athenian philosophers. We are told that Athenians like nothing more than telling or hearing the latest new idea, so they give him an audience with the town council, and introduce him as "a babbler who wants to say something." Oo, just like me!

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our scripture:

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,
"Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual 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 people 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 fumble about 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.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." At that point Paul left them.

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For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for the word of God among us. **Thanks be to God.**

It sounds like a compliment, like Eddie Haskell from "Leave it to Beaver" complimenting the Beav's mom, "How extremely spiritual you look today, Mrs. Cleaver." Other translations are less unctuous, however. The King James Version, for instance, has Al Paul accusing the Athenians of being "too superstitious." The Greek word in question is *deisidaimonesterous*. Literally translated as the fear or dread of a deity, or supernatural being, it corresponds pretty well to what German theologian Rudolf Otto in his 20th century classic, The Idea of the Holy, called daemonic dread. Otto uses this term to describe an overwhelming, non-rational experience of awe and personal nothingness, a feeling of having been created and, therefore, being totally dependent, a non-sensory sense of facing an absolute or wholly other, something completely different that erases what is known, reorders the possibility of knowing itself, and leaves nothing in its place. He argues that this experience of what he calls "the holy" lies at the foundation of every human religion.

The Roman Empire, following the Greeks, was very religious. They even kept the Greek gods. The names were changed . . . to protect the innocent. Somewhere in the long-forgotten past, that foundational daemonic dread was safely imprisoned in stone and story. The Roman Elite really did believe that their powerful empire was established and sustained by the divine favor they earned by building shrines, altars, and temples in the names of all the gods of this and that they could think of. If the author of Acts

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can be trusted, they even built altars to unknown gods, just in case they left one out, though one has to wonder about the sincerity of a prayer to "ol' what's his name." But the Paul of Acts sees an opportunity in the "The Unknown God" and he takes it. "The Unknown God" sounds like a perfect fit for the God of Israel who cannot be represented in any way, let alone assigned to any one human concern. As a catch-all sort of deity, "The Unknown God" only Comes into view when human efforts to control the stone and storied gods, be they financial, military, or religious, fail to deliver the desired results, making this deity, when the dust finally settles, the last and only one standing. And, by pointing out that the progression ultimately ends in a god no one knows, Al Paul, is saying the human searching, the fumbling, the eventual finding of the true God continues even for this most religious of cultures.

This is one of those places where Al Paul, diverges from Paul the Apostle who speaks for himself in Galatians, "[T]he gospel proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, nor did I Google it (sorry, that's not in there) but I received it through the revelation of Jesus Christ." Al Paul tries to congratulate us for "finding God." "Good going!" You did it!" "How very spiritual you look today!" Paul the Apostle gives no grounds for congratulations. God is not found, by luck or otherwise. God is radically unfindable, deliberately obscured by scandal and the presumption of foolishness. Al Paul is scoffed at for preaching the resurrection, a wild claim to be sure. But Paul the Apostle was beaten, imprisoned, and ultimately killed for preaching a God, . . . crucified. Paul's God is not just unknown, but reviled, not divine in

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any worldly sense, not even human. Jesus was tried and convicted by humanity's best effort to "get it right," and executed in the most dehumanizing, the most irreligious, the most godless way the most powerful empire of the time could conceive of. It is the crucifixion which gives the resurrection the power to reveal an unknown God. Paul the Apostle would not have proclaimed the unknown god, now known; he would have proclaimed The Unknown God unknowable. And Paul the Apostle would not have failed to mention the name, Jesus the Christ, by which the unknowable is proclaimed.

Included in our Book of Confessions, a collection of historical documents that reflect our reforming faith as Presbyterians, is a declaration written by theologian Karl Barth and adopted in 1934 at the Synod of Barmen, Germany to counter the so-called "German Christians" who exalted a racially pure nation and the rule of Adolph Hitler as God's will for the German people. The first thesis of the Barmen Declaration declares,

"Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine that the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, any other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation."

Karl Barth argued throughout his career that "God is the object of God's own self-knowledge," in other words, God is only fully known by God's self. As we see in the Barmen Declaration, Barth argued that the only God we can know is God's self-unveiling in the life, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus.

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I will confess that I was puzzled thinking about my last sermon a few weeks ago on so-called "doubting" Thomas. If you will remember, upon seeing the risen Christ, Thomas confesses, "My Lord and my God." Why both titles? Was it just bible-speak, doubling an expression to emphasize a point? We interchange the words "lord" and "god" in our liturgy all the time.

Perhaps the difference is between worship and love. Worship involves reverence, devotion, surrender, ultimately, service. We call this a church "service," after all. But we were not commanded to worship our God with all our heart, mind and strength. We were certainly not commanded to worship our neighbor! We need to know for certain what it is that we do worship. We need to pay very careful attention to what or to whom we surrender, to what or to whom we serve, to what or whom we relinquish our responsibility. Bob Dylan was right; we are always serving somebody. Love is very different. It is the union of two that are wholly other to each other, a knowing that perpetually yields to not knowing, an always and forever unknown that faithfully reveals itself in the undying hope of being known.

We worship the God revealed in the life, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus, but we love the God we cannot ever fully know. Now, I imagine you might be thinking, "Dan, how can we love what we cannot know? You have really stepped off the deep end this time. I hope you have a Zen koan to make some sense of this." I do. It comes from The Book of Equanimity, a collection of 100 koans assembled in the 12th century CE. A koan, to review, is often the story of an exchange between a Zen student and the teacher, often at the moment a student comes face to face with their true nature. It is similar to what Thomas

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saw in that locked room that the other disciples, in spite of their seeing the risen Christ not once but twice, did not see.

Case 20 from The Book of Equanimity:

Attention! Master Ji Zo asked Ho Gen, "Where have you come from?"

Ho Gen answered, "I have been on a pilgrimage."

Ji Zo asked Ho Gen, "What is the purpose of your pilgrimage."

Ho Gen answered, "I do not know."

Ji Zo remarked, "Not knowing is the most intimate."

Intimacy here means the inmost, the deepest, that which is most easily obscured by the faintest presumption of knowing what it is or what it is for. This not knowing is not mere acceptance that some things simply lie outside our comprehension. It is a refusal to allow our comprehension to hide the heart beating at the center of this life. I can suggest two ways to practice this way of knowing/not knowing. First, look beyond the usefulness of things. The mouth says to the nose, "I do the eating and speaking. Why are you above me?" The nose says "I hold the most honorable position. I am the scenter." Sniff. "Scent-er" Get it? And the nose says to the eyes, "Why are you above me?" The eyes answer, "Like the sun and moon, we have the powers of illumination and reflection." They ask the eyebrows, "why are you above us?" The eyebrows answer, "We have no idea." The master speaks, "Everyone knows the useful function, but no one appreciates the supreme power of the useless."

The second practice is a question. Can your God be named by any other word than "You?"

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Like the Athenians, we are surrounded by shrines to power, wealth and knowledge, even shrines to that most useless and unknown of all gods, the self. Break the stone shrines. Knock down the altars and temples. Release the one who surpasses what is known and unknown, and leaves nothing but itself in its place. The Unknown God was never the one that was imprisoned.