

“The Known God”

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Script: Acts 17:22-31

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Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From 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, ²⁷so 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. ²⁸For “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.”

²⁹Since 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. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because 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.’ —Acts 17:22-31

On Thursday an article of clothing was sold for \$75,110. It wasn’t a brand new diamond studded dress from the latest designer in Paris. It was a ripped-up dirty baseball jersey. I’m sure most of you have heard of the Boston Red Sox fan who was a construction worker on the new \$1.3 Billion Yankee stadium. To curse the team’s success, he buried a Red Sox jersey under 24 inches of concrete in the stadium. In this day and age it is hard to believe we find this kind of superstitiousness directing the behavior of construction workers. Yet it was topped by the New York Yankee club home who, when the cursed jersey was heard of, ordered workers to jack-hammer for 5 hours through the two feet of concrete to remove the jersey and refill the hole with concrete. Baseball has always been superstition prone it seems... from dirty socks, beards grown in winning streaks to approaching the plate to bat in a certain way. “Covering all the bases” means more than just having players on the field.

If this kind of thing works, I’m thinking of sneaking a copy of the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* into the library of the Presbyterian Church over here, and I just may have to see what I can get on Ebay for that green Lutheran Hymnal on my bookshelf! You’ve got to cover your bases after all.

All this came to mind when I read about Paul having to defend his faith on “Mars Hill” in Athens. On one of his missionary journeys, Paul finds himself in this university town of philosophers. He’s appalled by all the idols he finds there; gods for this and gods for that, and to cover all the bases, they built an insurance policy... an altar dedicated “to an unknown god.” In addition, there were Jews, stoics, and epicureans there with their own approaches to life and meaning. After sparring with them Paul was hauled-in for a hearing of sorts. He was accused of

“proclaiming foreign gods” and of being a “babblers”— literally a “seed picker”— promoting old ideas that are no longer relevant.

Wisely, he begins his defense by buttering them up a little bit: “I see how extremely religious you are” mentioning all the places of worship and idols they had. And as a good segway, he brings up the altar dedicated “‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

How is it that we know something, anything about God? We’ll get to what Paul says about this in a moment, but really, how can we know God in this life? There are people who claim to know God with a certainty that is admirable (like he’s the neighbor down the block you borrow a lawn mower from every now and then), but whose use of that knowledge and judgment of others makes us not so sure that “divine” neighbor down the block is all he’s cracked up to be. How do we know God?

Richard Louv, author of the book “*Last Child in the Woods – Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*” tells of his four year old son Matthew asking “**Dad, are God and Mother Nature married or are they just good friends?**” Matthew is on to something isn’t he? Nature reveals something of God to be sure. That’s what I’m told happens with greater regularity for some reason on Sunday morning’s than any other morning; on the golf course, on the lake or in the woods, people (men usually) tell me they find God on Sunday mornings. Why Sunday morning is more fruitful than other times for this holy encounter I’m not sure, but in all seriousness I don’t doubt that they find something of the sacred in nature. I’ve shared the experience of finding communion with God in the natural world. And that is kind of where Paul begins:

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.

God is the source of all creation and our very breath and life. This we can know from nature, filtered through our own reason or logic. God is complete and doesn’t need meat sacrifices placed before a gold statue. Rather, God is the giver of all life.

This is the *Via Positiva* (the positive way) of knowing God. “Heaven and earth are full of your Glory” as we say in the Sanctus in the Communion prayer. No doubt this is true. We know God as we learn more and more about heaven and earth.

With our logic, with our science, with our critical minds we come to know about God through the lens and experience of the created order. God perhaps is, if not married to Mother Nature, then at least going steady. The creation reveals the creator. For the Franciscan, St. Bonaventure the visible and invisible worlds are “*like a mirror full of lights representing divine wisdom, and like burning coals radiating out light.*” He wrote of the world as the “other Holy Scripture.”

We know of God in creation, and on the whole, the universe is a friendly and hospitable place... when we stay within our limits. The perfect conditions for life have been created and it sustains us. The fact that we have food shortages today is no indication that creation is hostile or inadequate. Creation is known for its wondrous order, extravagance and abundance. On the

other hand, not even Mother Nature is going to shed a tear if you freeze to death in an April snow-storm. The devastation of virus, tsunami, hurricane, drought, and so on reveal a cold-shoulder at least. As they say, a tornado is blind. All of this is to say that there is a limit to how much Mother Nature and our own reason will tell us about God. Try to approach God with logic and nature and you get about as far as those poly-theists in Athens.

One of my father's questions about God and the purpose of the universe was, "**Why is there something, and not nothing?**" Which leads us to purpose. Paul proclaimed that there is a purpose to creation and the ordering of life on earth. It is indicated in his speech by the words, "so that."

"...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."

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the existence of God is the yearning we have for God... the emptiness in our hearts and souls that longs for connection with the Creator. Our purpose, Paul says, is to seek a relationship with God and find communion there—the source and destination of our being. We are created for relationship.

How *do* we know God? At some point, if we want to know God, we have to move beyond our senses, science, logic, and the testimony of nature regarding God and enter into a relationship with Christ. The Mystics talked about knowing God with the heart. In Christ we find God revealed most clearly Paul proclaims, and those who have taken on the name of Christian have agreed with him ever since. Whenever there was a big snow-storm predicted by the weather forecasters my father would say, "**I'll believe it when I see it**" knowing that often things don't develop as promised. That approach may work with the weather, but when it comes to faith I think it works the other way around; if we are going to see things, see God, know God... then we have to have some measure of belief ultimately—we'll see it *when we believe it*, in other words.

When we open our hearts to Christ in a relationship of trust and openness, we find God revealed to us in whole new ways. In our Gospel lesson for today Jesus tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will be a part of their lives after he is gone. A special kind of knowing will be available in this relationship.

We so often think of the role of the Holy Spirit as "Comforter" that we don't even hear the function of God's Spirit as revealer.

"They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." —John 14:21

This is how God is revealed. In this intimate relationship of love, keeping commandments to love others, the heart of God is given. Given, not in rules or sentences, creeds or pronouncements. The truth Christ speaks of is given to us as pillow talk. Truth to our hearts. The truth that only life-long lovers can know of each other.

Mildred and Clarence were our neighbors in our first parish after Seminary. We moved from Denver to extremely small and quiet town rural Minnesota... they moved in from the country, where the "traffic" of one or two cars after 10pm qualified as busy and enough to keep them

awake. They were such dear people who loved us and who loved and knew each other so well that you could see Mildred completing Clarence's sentences with her mouth, and lovingly anticipating his next need and providing it before he asked. They knew each other as life-long lovers.

We know of God from Nature to be sure. We know of God through our skillful intellect. The Church's teaching and the words of Scripture show light upon the experience of God and redemption, but each of those has their limitations, and it is finally in our own experience that we find God known... deep in our hearts, our souls, without image, without thoughts, and beyond feelings.

A couple of weeks ago the text was of Jesus as the Good Shepherd whose voice the faithful know and respond to. Dr. Michael Byron says of knowing intimately Christ's voice:

There's just no short-cut around spending deliberate time and attention learning to recognize the voice of the Lord, getting really to know the character of the one who is our God and our savior. Eucharist, prayer, community, service, justice, scripture, faith formation, healthy relationships... these are the occasions when our shepherd invites us to get to know what his voice sounds like, to learn to trust it when we hear it. Even sheep don't trust con artists posing as people who claim to know and care about them. We shouldn't either...

And so, when we hear the voice that promises riches and the life of ease as the reward for following Jesus, we need to run away. The real Jesus never said anything like that. When we hear the voice of religious authority speak about raw juridical power, and appeal to threats and fear and retribution, we need to run away. That's not the Christ we meet here. When we hear the voice that assures us that we are objectively better than others because we are white, or American, or straight... or rich, or ordained, or well-educated, or members of the golf and tennis club, we need to run away.¹

How do we know God? For me, it all comes down to the mysterious dynamics of that relationship with Christ characterized by trust and love. We know God when we know the heart of Christ intimately - as a life-long lover. Then we can complete his sentences in this world and anticipate his next need and supply it, in love, before he even asks. So be it. Amen.

¹ Fr. Michael Byron, <http://www.stceciliaspn.org/liturgy.html#FMH>