

## In Praise of an Unknown God

Acts 17: 22-29

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The Athenians altar dedicated to an unknown God allowed them to cover all the bases, so to speak, lest they offend one of their gods unknowingly. It also provided Paul with a clever teaching tool. He could engage in religious discourse on their terms, even though their belief system differed markedly from his own. While we may scoff at the need for such an altar there is humility involved in this designation that many could benefit from in today's world. Especially those on the Christian right who tout their faith as exclusive and exclusionary. To them the notion of an unknown God is a simple oxymoron...there is no such thing.

I continue to think otherwise... I am well aware that we live in a world where fear and guilt are frequently used to manipulate awe into a God-fearing belief system that threatens to make cowards of us all. Fear causes us to doubt our worthiness and practice self-diminishment.

But I also know the life-changing grace-giving power of God. Through many difficult and painful circumstances in my life I have allowed myself to be led by a loving spirit away from fear and guilt. By learning from the compassion of others to trust in a gracious God I have walked away from a history of shame and fear and released from my body spirit the image of a judgmental and punitive God. This is a long story but here's the short version. I followed Paul's advice to be transformed by the renewal of my mind and learned that mind is a function of body not just brain

I now understand that the beginning of wisdom is awe not fear. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "awe precedes faith" To be open to the wonder of life is to walk in God's presence and be not afraid. I've dedicated my life and ministry to honoring the mystery of God...that not knowing that keeps me open to the possibilities for connection and wonder still before me. I am absolutely convinced that God is knowable and intimately involved in each of our lives for the good of all.

Grace, the extravagant and extraordinary gift of God's amazing love, seeks to greaten us into the fullness of the divinity in our humanity. I believe in my bones that God and humanity are one and that God calls us to live out, what Roger Hazelton once called, a more than human humanness; to let the "beyond within us," as the Quakers would say, to become visible in our daily discourse and endeavors.

The incredible fullness, beauty and abundance of God's love encourages us to be humble about what we still do not know. Often I call to mind the words of an ancient Sufi prayer, "I, who do not know, and know that I do not know, let me from this knowledge know."

To be a person of faith is to be a person of focus. When we keep our focus on the life of God that lives in all of us compassion thrives, difference is honored, and tolerance is practiced to the benefit of all creation. That being said the recent political landscape demonstrates how difficult it is to be a person of faith and embrace difference. Everywhere you turn, the language of faith is being manipulated for political gain.

The prophet Amos once spoke eloquently of justice rolling down like an ever-rolling stream.

But as we saw last week justice can be a means to an end where, in the end, very little justice is on display. I'm speaking of course of the "Justice Sunday," agenda promoted last week by The Freedom Research Council, an organization devoted to Family, Faith and Freedom.

The values of family, faith, and freedom, are values worth embracing, but the interpretative lenses used by this organization reveal an ever-expanding chasm between their language and the language of justice spoken and practiced by the United Church of Christ.

The Freedom Research Council (FRC for short) champions the Judeo-Christian worldview as the basis for a just, free, and stable society. We do too; but the FRC doesn't stop there. It considers the union of conservative values and persons of faith as the norm by which they judge all families and all freedoms.

When one peruses their website it isn't hard to see why Frank Rich of the New York Times recently called the FRC's Justice Sunday a high-tech lynching in prime time. Rich quoted comedian Bill Maher's comments on the "Tonight" show: "The phrase 'Activist judges' is a code word for gay." Maher said. "The judges being verbally tarred and feathered are those who have decriminalized gay sex as they once did abortion and who countenance marriage rights for same-sex couples."

Likewise, Rich argues the phrase "people of faith," as used by the event's organizers, is another duplicitous locution; [because] it's a code word for only one specific and exclusionary brand of Christianity. Some might conclude from the nature of religious discussion today that the Apostle Paul far exceeded his expectations when he tried to teach the Athenians a thing or two about God. Still when it comes to God, not knowing is not the same thing as not believing.

Paul's point was simple: there is only one God creator of all... in whom all people live and move and have being. Unlike the unknown God who was **one god among many** in Athens, Paul argued that God is **one** not **many**—one who is best known and revealed in the life of Jesus and in the resurrected Christ of faith.

The basis of our own faith relies on Paul's acknowledgement of God's oneness, God's omnipresence, and humanity's status as God's offspring. But those who hold to an exclusionary view of God, as in my God is better than your God, forget the most important dimension of Paul's faith. His faith was based not solely on what he was taught but on what he experienced. Paul came to the Christian faith because he experienced the power of the living God personally and profoundly on the road to Damascus.

Paul's faith also had a communal context. Though many today would argue otherwise, Paul wrote letters not theological treatises. And he encouraged others to seek their own experiential truth. To "feel after God" which is what Paul means by the phrase "grope for" is not just about reaching out metaphorically for something larger than ourselves but touching God's presence firsthand. This is possible Paul says because God is not far from each of us. Did you hear that?

God is not far from each of us. That's the core message for each of us today. As Paul reminds us and we need to remind ourselves daily, we live and move and have our being in divine reality. In other words there is no place I can be that God is not! Say it with me please...there is no place I can be that God is not! The essence of God is communion and the same is true for us—being itself is communion. To live joyfully is to know the divinity of our humanity, the "beyond within" as I said before.

Now I'd like to tell you that living in this reality is something I have achieved once and for all...but that would be stretching credulity, particularly when it comes to lesser beings, as in the hordes of ants that took up residence in our apartment this past week.

Communion was not the first or last thing on my mind I assure you. But... I digress.

Paul's notion of feeling after God remains an essential aspect of faith, and any faith worth its salt makes room for experiencing not knowing in relation to God's richly expressive mystery

Jesus said ask and it shall be given, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be open—he called us to an active faith, a searching faith, a feeling after faith, and a faith willing to admit that yes, God is still speaking.

The Buddha understood this as well: "Believe nothing merely because you have been told it," he said. "Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be kind, conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings—that doctrine believe and cling to and take as your guide." This wisdom applies to my teaching too.

There will always be groups like the FRC who offer one view of God and one pathway to faith in Jesus. Our task is not to take them on battle for battle, justice issue for justice issue. Our task is to feel after God and know the fullness of God's reality for ourselves and live in the integrity of that fullness.

We are called to "stand in our power" and allow the diversity of God's life to be our own. To truly live and move and have our being in God, we must practice feeling after God, always remembering that God is not far off. God is here in our midst, within each of us.

I know of no better way to do this than participating with thanksgiving in the promises of this table. This communion table is a table; it is not an altar. It is a place of welcome and transformation, of possibility and grace. All are welcome here, baptized or not, those who have faith and those with no faith. As we gather at this table we participate in a feast of possibilities that God holds out to us. As we come to know each other better, I pray you will come to know that this table celebrates the feast of our lives in community. May all of us be blessed by the possibilities before us and the God of grace who is never far off. Amen.