

**Knowing the Unknown God**  
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East Cobb United Methodist Church  
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**Scripture:** Acts 17:22-31

Sandy and I spent some time last Sunday afternoon at Cedarwood Cemetery in Hertford, NC, visiting the final resting place for many generations of my family members, including my mother. It is not a large cemetery by most standards, but it is the largest in that rural North Carolina county. We spent some time walking around and reading the gravestones. My grandparents, my great-grandparents, infants (3 generations) that did not survive, my great uncle with the circuit rider medallion on his headstone signifying that he was a United Methodist pastor, the best Sunday School teacher I ever had who could not read well enough to read the scripture. But he could tell us and show us how to live the Christian life. There was the stone for James Augustus (Jimmy) Hunter – you may remember better by his nickname, “Catfish,” who was so tragically taken from us at age 53. We attended the same high school and graduated the same year. Many other names were familiar, but most there were not. Many had markers indicating military service to our nation. Many of them were monuments to lives well lived, but I did not know them and could not share with Sandy or anyone else the details of their lives. They were nothing more than names carved in granite and marble. I know they meant a lot to someone but not to me personally. We stood wondering what we had missed from not having known these children of God.

**Background**

Paul, in our scripture for today, is having a similar experience. He has been walking around Athens getting a feel for the place and seeing the sights, which must have been glorious. The Greek empire had declined, but Greek thinking still dominated the Mediterranean world. Paul’s preparation in familiarizing himself with the Greek culture is something we often miss in our Christian witness. We tell people what we know in our words and never stop to ask ourselves whether those words will have the same meaning or any meaning at all in the context of others. Paul got to know Athens before he shared with the Athenians. That is an example we should follow in sharing the faith with others. Yet, Paul did not deliver a message of condemnation, even though it would have been accurate to do so. The Athenians were idolaters. One writer says there were 30,000 altars to various deities in Athens. Another says it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Still another called Athens one large altar. You can never ridicule or insult a person into believing. Faith must be presented and seen as a more excellent alternative.

Paul is invited to speak to the Greeks at the Areopagus, a place the Romans called Mars Hill. The Areopagus was also the Greek ruling council that evolved into the Greek court of judicial appeals. About 500 years earlier, Socrates was tried at the Areopagus in part for promoting foreign deities. Paul is not doing the same thing. Surely he knew that he could lose his life for sharing the gospel so forcefully.

**Paul’s Statement—“You are extremely religious....”**

Paul begins with a very simple statement: “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.” (Acts 17:22-23). Some of you may have a translation that reads, “You are very superstitious.” Paul chose a word that was deliberately ambiguous. It could mean either “religious” in a neutral sense or it could mean “superstitious.” No doubt the Athenians took it as a compliment, while Paul regarded them as extremely superstitious. Both meanings were true. They were religious and they were superstitious.

To me this is one of the most powerful scenes in the New Testament—Paul preaching the gospel in the intellectual capital of the world. His words are clear, concise, and representative of what he meant when he said we should become “all things to all people” (1 Corinthians 9:22). We know that Paul was eloquent in speaking to his own people. But here we see him before an audience of gentiles who have no understanding of Jesus Christ and little or no understanding of God. They just knew enough to understand that they did not understand everything and built an altar hopefully to satisfy the god or gods they did not understand. In a diverse world, we often share Paul’s dilemma, albeit not as dramatically. We suddenly find ourselves with the opportunity to share something with those who know little about the “Unknown God,” and we find ourselves ill equipped to do so.

### **God Will Not Stay Put**

The Athenians were accustomed to making altars to gods and placing them wherever that felt appropriate. Paul carefully explains to them that this God does not live in shrines made by man nor does God need anything we can provide. (Acts 17:24-25). God gives to us life and breath and everything (Acts 17:25). We are made in the image of God, so we like to create as well. Our problem comes when we think our ideas and creations are superior to God’s. We go out and honor our achievements with monuments and shrines. We are successful in building a life that matters in our view only to realize that God is not getting the glory – we are. God cannot be confined to human dimensions and human creations. He cannot be enshrined in a building or a temple.

God will not stay put! He will not stay where we leave him. God will not stay out of matters we wish God did not know about. God is ever present when we would prefer to meet God on our schedule – whether for an hour on Sunday morning or some other scheduled rendezvous. In Romans 1:18-21, Paul says that the truth about God is “clearly seen” by each person. But when we suppress that truth revealed to us and in us, there is nothing left but idolatry, and after that is sexual sin, and after that is every kind of sin, and after that, the total collapse of morality (Romans 1:18-32). As long as we try to force God to be what we want God to be, things will get progressively worse. As we become more sinful and self-centered, we move further from the God we were seeking in the first place. Paul says we exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). Have you replaced the God of all creation with one that looks just like you?

Anthropologists tell us that every society on earth—no matter how primitive—has some conception of a higher power. It may be evil spirits that inhabit the rocks or unnamed deities who send death and destruction on the earth. Or it may be some mystical force that fills the universe. But all people by nature seek ultimate meaning outside themselves. Even the most corrupt religion demonstrates man’s innate capacity to know God. Paul did not condone their idolatry, but he recognized it as the “groping of humanity” (Acts 17:27b) for truth they knew existed but could not find. Idolatry exists because humanity has

suppressed the true knowledge of God. We were made to know God, but when we suppress the truth of God found in creation and written in our own hearts, we always turn to idolatry. Paul likened humanity's longing for God to groping in the dark for God. We all are searching for God whether or not we are willing to admit it. He told the Athenians that, as we search, we are not far from God for, "In him we live, and move, and have our being." (A quote attributed to the Greek writer Epimenides). Other sermons recorded in Acts delivered by Peter, Stephen, and Philip focused on Hebrew scripture, but Paul used Greek poetry to explain the essence of the relationship he had come to proclaim.

The late Dr. James Montgomery Boice put it this way: "The reason men and women do not know God is that they do not want to know him." Sometimes we wonder why others won't respond to us. Even after we answer all of the questions and fully explain the gospel, why won't people come to faith in Christ? It's because our questions weren't the real problem. Our problem is that we don't want God or anything else to come before what we want. We want our idols more than we want to know God. Until we are ready to turn from our idols, we cannot embrace the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

### **Worldly Wisdom Is Not Enough**

Shortly after he left Athens, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth nearby. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, he says that "the world by wisdom did not know God." I wonder if he was thinking of his experience at the Areopagus as he wrote those words. If any society could have known God through human wisdom, it should have been Athens. But even the wisdom of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle was not enough. Wisdom can enlighten your mind, but it cannot save your soul. There must be something more - the hunger of the human heart. There is a God-shaped place in every human being that only God can fill. God put it there and only God can fill that emptiness. When we refuse to allow God to fill the place he made for himself in our lives, we always try to find satisfaction and meaning with something else. And it never works! The writer in Ecclesiastes 3:11 reminds us that God "has put eternity in their hearts." St. Augustine prayed, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." So you will fill your lives with something, but will it be of God? If not, there will be no rest and no peace.

### **Ignorance Is No Excuse**

In the past, humanity was able to plead ignorance and get away with sin and hostility toward God. Paul tells the Athenians that those days are gone. God overlooked our ignorance; but now that we know the truth, we can no longer pretend to live in ignorance. Paul clearly states that we should turn to God in anticipation of the judgment that will come to the world (Acts 17:30-31). We love to rationalize and reason away our shortcomings and pitfalls. And because they sound plausible to us (many times they don't really), we think everyone, including God, should buy our flimsy excuses. We can think of course. God gave us the capacity to reason and think things through; however, we can't think God's thoughts unless the Holy Spirit illuminates our minds so that we can see God's truth. The right way must be revealed from above.

Athens was the city of man if ever there was one. Human intellect and wisdom and cultural superiority were the hallmarks of the Hellenistic world for centuries. Paul, "an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ," comes to the city of man and attempts to introduce them to the unknown God. What is not clear from this passage is that Paul was not very successful at Athens. They heard him but would not change their ways. We have heard as well, but have we changed? Are we different because we have come to know the Unknown God?

Paul provoked a decision that day at the Areopagus. The men of Athens were told a new truth but decided to hold on to the old and familiar. Are we like that? Every time we face the truth about God, we make a decision. Often that decision is to do nothing. That really means we will do nothing differently, which really is a decision not to know God better.

### **What We Worship**

In Cedarwood Cemetery last Sunday, Sandy and I were walking among hundreds of memorials – that desperate attempt to preserve the memory of our loved ones when only the shell of the person remains on this earth. It helps our memory to have a place to go to remember. But the true memories are not in those memorials. They are in our hearts and minds.

We spend billions constructing bridges and highways; buildings and warships; hospitals and universities; and yes, churches, and put our names on them. Now, we have Facebook, Twitter, and other social media designed to focus the world's attention on us and what is on our minds. I'm on Facebook and Twitter every day, so I very much believe in using social media to get positive, constructive messages out to our world. And I don't mean to imply that we should not build bridges, hospitals, and such. My question is: When will we devote as much effort to remembering God and all God has done for us as we do in trying to have the world remember us?

Most of us will never build a landmark building or have a structure with our name on it. Yet we are just as eager to build monuments to ourselves. Athenians built altars to every god they could think of and some they could not. How many altars have you built? How many things do you worship? Your house? Your car? That big flat-screen aTV? Your smartphone? Your circle of friends? Your work? Maybe you even worship your church? You fill in the blank. Whatever you put ahead of God in your life is what you worship, and that thing or practice becomes the altar at which you worship.

### **Decision Time – Know the Unknown God!**

God is great. God's power created everything, saved us from our sinful selves, and sustains us even in the midst of extreme adversity, if we allow it. Maybe today is your Areopagus. Maybe you are wise in the ways of the world but have never really gotten to know the Unknown God Paul speaks of. Why not today? Why not now? If not today, when? If not this God, then who will save you from yourself? The Athenians considered themselves too sophisticated to receive the message of the one true God. Are you? God is waiting for you to walk past all those altars you have built over the years and come to him with the burning desire to know God better and make him Lord of your life. No one can do that for you.

As we remember the sacrifice of so many the Memorial Day, we must not forget the ultimate sacrifice. War brought death and destruction to our world, and we remember. But the war waged on Calvary that day changed everything. This day, remember what God has done for you! It's your decision. God is and he is no longer unknown. God has done his part. It's your turn.

Prayer