

The Unknown God
Acts 17:16-31
May 25, 2014

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: **to an unknown god**. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*

When today's reading from the book of Acts opens, Paul is in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy. While he is waiting, Paul takes a tour of the town and sees the spiritual ignorance of the people. The Greeks of Paul's day considered themselves very spiritually astute, but their spirituality was based on the lies of Satan, this world, and their own sinful nature.

We can see the same thing in our city and in our country. We live in a society that claims spirituality but their spirituality is based on things other than the true God. And, of course, when people have the wrong spiritual base, sin is always present. Look at our "Christian" nation. Our land is condemned by Isaiah when he said: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags* (Is 64:6).

When Paul saw this, he was unable to remain silent. He began to preach the Gospel of Christ in the synagogue and the market place to anyone who would listen. When Paul's message made it to the right people, he was invited to speak to those who considered themselves the great thinkers of the day.

It has been estimated, at Paul's time, Athens contained over 25,000 religious statues and monuments. The one that caught Paul's eye was the one labeled: *To an Unknown God*. Paul saw his opportunity to connect with the people in a medium they could relate to and he seized it. Paul began to explain this unknown God, who loved people enough to sacrifice his son for them.

It isn't hard for us to picture an ancient society with no knowledge of the one true God. We can even picture a modern culture, in some far away land, without knowledge of the one true God. But today, I want you to think about the fact that the unknown God of ancient Greece is still the unknown God to many people in Detroit, Novi, Farmington Hills, Michigan, and America. We need to ask ourselves, "Why is that true?"

God is the unknown God because he is the unseen God.

People need to see the Lord. They need to see the real Lord, the true Lord. In his Gospel account, John tells about some Greeks who came to Philip and said: *Sir, we would like to see Jesus* (Jn 12:21). The same is true today. People would like to see Jesus. They need to see Jesus. But, too often, they don't see Jesus. Why?

Consider the ungodly people in this country. Whether they are the majority or the minority makes no difference. Look at what they are allowed to accomplish in their effort to keep people from seeing Jesus.

These people use our constitution for their own purposes when they deny the spiritual base this country was founded upon. These people have successfully removed the Ten Commandments from our schools. And they are succeeding in removing them from our courthouses and court rooms.

They remain on high alert to be sure Jesus is never a part of Christmas plays and musicals. They have gained enough influence to get retail stores to ignore all Christian signs of Christmas or Easter. They show no shame in suing any city that would put a nativity scene on city property. In fact, when they sue these cities they call themselves heroes of freedom.

At the same time, these ungodly promote and support a media that is un-Christian. They praise government support for something like The National Endowment for the Arts, which has no qualms about art that defames the image of Christ.

Why are these folks so determined in their war against Christianity? Because they don't want people to see Jesus. And, if the people should see Jesus, they want them to see a perverted image of Jesus – never the real Jesus.

God is the unknown God because he is not served.

When Joshua was about to lead the Children of Israel into the promised land, he issued a challenge to them: *Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord* (Josh 24:15).

Joshua said this to the Israelites. He wasn't talking to the heathen nations they were about to encounter. He was speaking to people who were very aware of the true God. Do you see what I'm getting at? Serving God is a choice. It's not something forced upon people. Even those who claim the name Christian must decide whether or not they will serve God. Therein lies another problem. More people want to be called Christian than want to be Christian.

Someone once said that the only thing necessary for evil to thrive is for good men to do nothing. That statement is as true as something can be. The vacuum created by good people doing nothing will always be filled with evil – guaranteed!

Why do we live in a country that has countless laws to protect animals but condones the murder of a million unborn babies every year? While I'm sure God loves all of his creations, which do you think God places a higher value on – a baby or a puppy?

Why do we live in a country where the Gideons are forbidden to hand out Bibles in our schools but Planned Parenthood can distribute birth control and condoms to our school children?

Why do we live in a country that promotes giving Bibles to people in prison, but discourages giving Bibles to children before they start down the road that leads to prison?

These things are the way they are because God is the unknown God to too many people in this country. And that happens because too many people who claim the name of Jesus don't spend much time serving Jesus. They have other priorities; the economy, foreign policy, a woman's right to choose, political correctness so as not to offend.

We also fail to serve God when we fail to speak about God. Paul told the Corinthian church: *With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore [we] speak* (2 Cor 4:13). And the psalmist cries out: *Let the redeemed of the Lord say so* (Ps 107:2).

Many people don't know about God because too many Christians fail to speak about God. If they are to know, we must tell them. Christians keeping God to themselves was a problem even in Paul's day. This is what he told the Roman Christians: *How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* (Rom 10:14).

God is the unknown God because people do not seek his kingdom.

Quite often we hear people speak of finding the Lord but, in reality, it is always the other way around. We don't find Jesus. Jesus isn't lost. He finds us. God has been finding people since the day he walked through the Garden of Eden calling to Adam: *Where are you?* (Gen 3:9).

Because of sinful human nature, just like Adam, people try to hide from God. But the love of God is relentless in seeking people. Jesus told about God's love for people when he said: *The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.* (Lk 19:10).

God's love is what motivates the Holy Spirit to seek God's lost children. Jesus said: *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him* (Jn 6:44). That drawing occurs through the action of the Holy Spirit.

When the Spirit of God convicts the heart of an unbeliever, he creates a longing for God. If the unbeliever responds to the Spirit's conviction, and that person calls on the name of God, he or she is saved. If the person rejects the faith the Spirit brings, that person condemns himself or herself to eternity in hell.

Jesus tells us to seek the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). Seeking the kingdom of God and praying *Thy will be done* (Mt 6:10) are the same things. When we seek God's kingdom we work to do God's will. So, what is God's will. It's God's will that his church grow and his lost children be found.

One of the most important ways God seeks his lost children is through his found children. Scripture says: *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ* (Rom 10:17).

If we are truly seeking God's kingdom and the fulfillment of his will, then we take Jesus seriously when he says: *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you* (Jn 20:21). And, when he tells us to: *Go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* (Mt 28:19-20).

We are all saved sinners. We were all condemned to eternity in hell until the grace of God covered our sins with the blood of Jesus. Because of that fact, out of sheer gratitude to God, it should be our greatest pleasure to introduce an unbelieving world to the Unknown God. I pray that we will seize every opportunity to proclaim the name of Christ.