

Wesley United Methodist Church
Easter 6
May 17, 2020
To An Unknown God
Scripture: Acts 17:22-31
John 14:15-21

I don't know if it is legend or fact, but the story is that about 600 years before Paul went to Athens there was a terrible plague that threatened the whole city. Just as today, everyone had ideas about what to do about the plague and how to stop it before it destroyed the entire city. Epimenides, a poet from Crete came up with a plan. He suggested that they should release a flock of black and white sheep into the city and wherever a sheep lay down it should be sacrificed to the god whose shrine was nearest to the place where the sheep laid. If there were not a shrine nearby, then the sheep should be sacrificed to "an unknown God."ⁱ

When Paul went to Athens, he saw the shrines to many different gods and also a shrine to "An Unknown God". Being the good preacher he was, he took advantage of this to begin to make a connection with the people of Athens and to get them to listen to him. He appealed to their curiosity to know about everything and told them that he was going to tell them about this "Unknown God."

As I was reading this passage for this week, I began to think about the large number of people today for whom the God we worship would be an "unknown God." Oh, they might have heard about God – it's pretty hard not to in our world of instant news. It's pretty hard not to have heard about the "Christian God" when media accounts tell everyone about preachers who say that all gay people are an abomination and destined for hell. It's hard not to think you know about this Christian God and to make

judgments about those who follow this God, when in the middle of a pandemic people are insisting that they can continue to worship in groups of hundreds or thousands because God will protect them from the virus that causes Covid-19. It's hard not to think you know what this Christian God is like when preachers or politicians talk about God punishing the world because Liberal people, who they say pretend to be believers, think that its okay for people to come from places where they are not safe to seek safety and a new life in the nation that for years has talked about the "American dream" and been proclaimed as the "Promised Land".

There are a lot of people who think they know this god, and many of them do not want anything to do with that god. But I think that for many the Christian God, or at least the God I worship, is for them an "unknown god." I fear that the God I know and love, the God who is Love is an "unknown God" for far too many.

Now, I'm going to be the first to recognize that anything I or anyone else says falls far short of describing God. God is not limited by the words that we know how to use, so anything we say about God is going to be at best a partial description of who God is and our understanding is also not complete. At the same time, I believe that proclamation about this God has been co-opted by people who, I suspect, are worshiping a God very different than the God that many of us know.

I think it is time for those of us who worship the God who we learn about through Jesus, the God of love and inclusion, the God of justice, mercy and grace, to speak out and to speak up and to live in ways that witness to who God is; this God who is unknown to far too many people. It is time for us to do as Paul did and to reveal this unknown God; this God who we think it is important to worship and honor and praise; this God who

has made a difference in our lives. It is time for us to let others know why God is important in our lives.

Paul tells the people of Athens that this unknown God, this God whom we worship, is not contained by altars, or shrines, or buildings. We may have placed a lot of emphasis on our church buildings, but the last few months have taught us and reminded us that Church is not closed during this pandemic. Church buildings are closed, but church – you and I – people living their lives as followers of Jesus are not closed.

People are asking and debating when churches will reopen. We will begin to worship again in our sanctuary when it is safe, but we are not closed. We continue to worship and digital worship has allowed people who are not physically able to come to our building to be present in worship.

Today our worship service includes a member who is currently in Costa Rica. Our worshipping congregation includes people who because of health issues or distance are not able to worship with us even when a pandemic is not controlling our actions. We continue to be in ministry with each other and we are still in mission in our community – and maybe even more so as we become more aware of the needs around us. God is not confined to a building.

Paul tells the people of Athens that this unknown God, this God whom we worship is the God who created the world and everything in it. I do not believe that there is any real contradiction between God and science. But if we are going to proclaim that God made the world and everything in it, then we also need to realize that one part of the world is not more precious to God than another part. Every hill, mountain, valley, body of water, desert, rainforest, tundra, or glacier is precious to God. And

it's time that we started to live our lives in ways that show that we take creation seriously and value it as a gift from God who has given us responsibility to take care of it.

Paul tells the people of Athens that this unknown God, this God whom we worship is the God who created all of humanity. And just like the physical world in all its diversity is precious to God, every person of every color, shape, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or any other word we use to describe people, every person is precious to God. God loves you and I and God also loves and values the people with whom we disagree and even the people we do not like.

Like the people of Athens, we today have many different gods to whom we give loyalty and credence. We may not call them gods, but essentially a god is whomever or whatever we follow, where we place our priorities, what we think is most important in our lives.

We only have to look around and listen a little to hear about the many different gods that people think will be the god who will get us through this pandemic. One of the gods that is driving much of the rhetoric today is the god of the economy. We have to open up because our economy is suffering; businesses are going to close, and people are going to lose money. Please know that I understand that this pandemic is doing terrible things to our economy.

But if we listen to the rhetoric, the economy is more important than the thousands, or tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people who have or will die. In much of this rhetoric the lives of many are expendable. I recognize how very very complicated this is, and even more so I recognize that I am speaking from a place of privilege. I have not lost my job. I have a safe place to live and enough for food to eat. It is a minor

inconvenience that I may not be able to buy everything I want at the grocery store.

For some it is not a god of the economy but a god of survival that they believe is dependent upon a strong economy. Too many people are starving. Lines at food pantries are longer than most of us have ever seen. The concerns about the economy are very real. But even as we make these tough decisions, as we deal with multiple important priorities, we need to ask ourselves which God we are following. Is the god of the economy the one that is driving our decisions?

Or are we maybe following the god of convenience or the god of independence – the god that tells me that all that matters is what I want or what I think I need. We are seeing demonstrations and people arguing about whether or not anyone has the right to tell us that we need to wear masks in public or when we cannot socially distance – a phrase most of us had never heard until a few months ago.

Are we concerned only about what we think is important to us, or are we willing to make changes and adjustments to our lives to protect the lives of others? What value do we place upon the lives of other people – especially people we do not know.?

Do we worship the god of success, prestige, and possessions? Are we more concerned about our own way of life and what we can accumulate than we are about how our accumulation and practices take advantage of others, or how others suffer because of what we do to get ahead?

These are not fun questions? They are tough ones and ones we don't want to hear, and we may be quick to say, "well that's not me." But part of our faith means that we are called not simply to "accept Jesus" one day and then forget about him for the rest of our lives. Our faith calls us to

be intentional about growing in our faith, about being willing to ask ourselves the tough questions.

I serve as a member of a committee that has a major role in deciding whether people will be given credentials for parish ministry and other forms of ministry. When we encounter someone who is very new in the process, we are often heard to say that at this point, the person doesn't yet know what they don't know. We recognize that they have a lot of growing and learning to do and that through the years we hope that they will continue to develop their faith and their ability to engage in serious theological discussion that creates an awareness of the affect our understanding of God and our practice of ministry can have upon those with whom we are called to be in ministry.

This is true for each of us also as followers of Jesus. It is important for us to continue to be open to God's leading, to be willing to ask ourselves or have someone else ask us some of the tough questions about what we are doing and how we are growing in our relationship with God.

The story is told of a young boy who fell out of bed one night. When his mother asked him what happened, he said, "I stayed too close to where I got in." For each of us, the challenge is to continue to grow so that we don't someday discover that the God of Jesus is an unknown God to us.

God calls us to love others and to pursue love with a passion that will not happen on our own. As we grow in our faith, as we come to know this Unknown God better, we demonstrate the depth of our love for God and God's love for us through the depth of our love for others.

I invite us to be willing to ask ourselves and God the tough questions, "Where do I need God's love so that I can love others? What in my life, currently or in the past, may be blocking me from being truly open to

experiencing God's love and to sharing it with others? I pray that we will ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with God's heart for others and to ask how God to show us specific ways that we can love them as God loves them and as God loves us.

Let us pray:

O Loving God, we pray that we may truly come to know you so that you are not just an unknown God to us, but so that you are truly the very fiber of our being. We pray that we may be open to your leading and your love as we encounter opportunities to share your love with others. We pray that we will not be afraid to ask ourselves the tough questions about where we, ourselves, are obstacles to you love. Fill us with your love. Give us a heart to love others as you love us. Amen.

ⁱ This story or legend found in several sources including "Keeping Holy Time: Year A", Douglas Wingeier editor.