

1 Peter 3:13-22
Acts 17:22-31

The Unknown God
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Al
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Easter 6

When the great sociologist Sacvan Bercovitch came as a young man from Canada to the United States, he experienced more culture shock than he anticipated. He described it this as a God-haunted society, religion-infused at every level: “a country that, despite its arbitrary territorial limits, could read its destiny in its landscape, and a population that, despite its bewildering mixture of race and creed, could believe in something called an American mission, and could invest that patent fiction with all the emotional, spiritual and intellectual appeal of a religious quest.”¹

No question, we are among the most scrupulously religious people on earth, outside of conservative Islamic nations. As Paul told the Greek elders at the Areopagus – “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” America has spun off more sects, more declensions of the Christian faith, than anywhere else on earth. It is a fascinating study. Mormons, Pentecostals, Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Nazarenes, Church of God Cleveland Tennessee, Primitive Baptists, Free Will Baptists, Gospel Truth for the Nations Church on 49th St. in Wichita, Highlands Church across town, Unity, Unitarians, Pastafarians & ½ a dozen different kind of Presbyterians. To name but a few.

We are prolific, nay – profligate, in our creation of new religious forms. Our religious altars litter the culture. Even when we secularize it, our “pursuit of happiness” makes iconic, ultimate concerns out of entertainers, self-improvement gurus, and sports – “Roll Tide”. (Though we may have to cede the sports-fanatic crown to the world’s soccer fans.) There is some desperation in the sort of search for matter and meaning that finds Paris Hilton interesting. Something missing inside. Some hunger for transcendence not easily fed. Everywhere there are our own versions of the altar to an unknown God. The problem is not that Americans don’t believe in God, but that we believe in too many!

We are a scrupulously religious people, but perhaps not as Christian as we long to seem. Sometimes we are given to extreme and unhelpful religion. I always thought that being a Christian had to do with some confession of faith in Jesus Christ. But James Dobson – arguably the most influential and powerful Protestant in the world, from his Focus on the Family headquarters in Colorado Springs - has said at various times that Democrats are “out to get” people of faith, and that he doesn’t think Republicans John McCain and Fred Thompson are Christian. He must be using different criteria than I do.

We’ve had some interesting judges in Alabama (Brevard Hand and Roy Moore) that turned the Ten Commandments into a sort of litmus test. As if some magic benefit would accrue to society if we just erected that altar on the courthouse lawn or the schoolhouse wall. I remember an interview I once saw on film where the interviewer asked: “What does it mean to be a Christian?” And the responder said, “To follow the 10 Commandments.” Which is wrong, of course. That’s not even an adequate description of what it means to be a Jew, and certainly not of what it means to be a Christian. I think we are a very confused folk in matters of religion.

Some years ago I was among a group of pastors in the town in which I lived, gathered together by a district judge and the police chief, both friends of mine, both progressive and thoughtful people to get our support and participation in a program of theirs designed to reduce juvenile gang violence. As I recall, it was an all right program but never got off the ground because of the way they went about it. They wanted us to our faith agendas as a part of the program, but made it clear they didn't really care what our churches or denominations believed or what they didn't. They just thought religion of any sort was good for the community, and that our highest goal should be the same as theirs. Our problem was, we all thought the content mattered more than the form. We'd committed our lives to it. To worship at the altar of an unknown god simply because my friends thought it would be useful for us to be religious was a bit of an affront. The same as when President Eisenhower notoriously remarked that the United States was and had to be a religious nation, and he didn't care what religion it had, as long as it had one.²

How did Paul deal with such people? ("Our world, like theirs, is variously if sometimes stupidly religious," as Professor Clifton Black said.³) When Paul was in Athens, he was invited to speak at the Areopagus. Ἀρεῖος πᾶγος (Hill of Ares). The Areopagus was the name both of a group and the site on which they met. They were the most prestigious council of Elders in Athens. They met to discuss matters ranging from the philosophical to the practical concerns around the running of a democracy. Paul had first been ridiculed by these elder statesmen, but they were intellectually curious and given to fads, so they decided to hear him out. He told them, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way. As I went about the city and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I found among them an altar inscribed 'to an unknown god.' I know this God; let me tell you about him."

Polytheistic cultures would often have an altar to an "unknown god," however they described that, covering their bases lest some god be overlooked. So it would not have been an unreachable thought for them when Paul explained that the "unknown god" was the one who made the world and everything in it, and really didn't need an altar, and was probably the one their own poet Epimenides was talking about when he wrote "In God we live and move and have our being." Paul talked the whole time without mentioning Jesus by name, and only describing him at the end as the man who would judge the world with righteousness, but that God has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Not exactly the traditional Gospel message Paul usually delivered. But he was in Athens.

Some have criticized Paul's sermon in Athens, saying he soft-peddled the Gospel, and he should have told it the traditional way, put it in the Athenians' face, and let the Spirit move them to accept or reject Christ on the spot. It raises the question of separatism or accommodation. How much do you accommodate the culture you are in, in order to communicate the Good News? The church has done it for a long time. Just as we redeemed the Cross from a tool of execution to a symbol of resurrection, we claimed the evergreen tree from Germanic tribes and turned it into a Christmas tree, claimed Spring equinox symbols from pagan peoples and turned them into Easter eggs, and even turned the Celtic fertility goddess Bridgit into a Saint!

I think this is maybe Paul's best sermon, that it shows a mature faith, a quiet confidence, and a brilliant mind. He did not feel he had to be smarter than his listeners. He respected them and respected their culture. He quoted their own poets. He did not seem to think that every other philosophical or religious thought had to be dashed as false in order to prove the gospel true. He affirmed to them that every single person is a child of God. And when he got around to the hardest thing for them to swallow – the Resurrection – he presented it as an assurance given to all. Not your hellfire and damnation preacher.

We could call this the Areopagean way of doing theology. And perhaps it is as fitting for Americans now as for Athenians then. We live in an increasingly multi-cultural and religiously diverse society, and it will only become moreso as the world continues to shrink. The Good News we have to share will be more winsomely presented when we recognize in all people that inherent capacity for religion – and that we are all groping our way toward God, as Paul put it – God who is wanting to be found.

An Areopagean way of being faithful would move us from being insulated and inward-looking, talking only to ourselves, and be intentionally in dialogue with other faiths – Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons, etc. It would say “My truth doesn't have to destroy every other truth.” It would admit that God who is *other* than we is ultimately beyond our understanding and therefore – to some degree – unknown to us as well. It would admit that we know so much but only so much, and that for certain there are things we don't know for certain. A God that our finite minds could completely describe wouldn't be much of a God.

There is the story of the Zen master who poured tea for his pupil. He kept pouring until it overflowed the cup and ran onto the mat. The pupil cried, “Stop! The cup is overfull.” “How can I teach you,” said the Master, “until you first empty your cup?”

And at the end, an Areopagean way of telling the Gospel, after respecting the sensibilities of those with whom we share the earth, could say – “This is the story we know – about the one whom God raised from the dead. Jesus Christ. He is the way we have found, to know the unknown God.”

We hunger for God who we long so deeply to know, groping (as Paul said) in the dark to feel and find our way towards God, who is finally not far from each one of us – as close as breath. In God we live and move and have our being. We are surrounded by the Holy. Better to be certain of less, to breathe more, and to pay attention. Christ is risen. God is *right there!*

¹ Bercovitch, Sacvan, The American Jeremiad, University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, xi

² Bloom, Harold, The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1992, p. 49

³ Black, Clifton; Professor of Biblical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, workingpreacher.org