

May 14, 2023 Sixth Sunday of Easter

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Acts 17:22-31

"Bigger than a Breadbox"

Douglas T. King

"To an unknown God." They were words etched upon a stone altar. Paul finds himself in a cauldron of competing philosophies, religions, and spiritual practices and before him stands an altar "to an unknown God." What an entirely fitting discovery.

As we just heard, Paul opens his sermon to this interesting crowd by praising them, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Many have suggested that this is Paul either being sarcastic or solely trying to curry favor with his audience.

I am not so sure this is true. Yes, it was a common oratory technique in that culture, a little opening flattery to get folks on one's side. By the way, have I mentioned how particularly lovely you all look today??? But perhaps he was truly honoring their efforts to be in relationship with God. Yes, he will go on to challenge their notions about how God "does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands." But Paul, whose journey had already taken him from staunchly opposing the early church to leading the early church, was not unfamiliar with the twists and turns that come with our efforts to find the divine. I would suggest he could indeed have been humble as he preached the truth of the gospel he had been blessed to receive. Yes, he was clearly displeased

with the idols he found there but I do not think that makes him unsympathetic to their journey.

Paul brings to the crowd a message of God as the creator and preserver of all life. God, "gives to all mortals life and breath and all things." He goes on to quote the Stoic philosopher Aratus, "'In him we live and move and have our being.'" Paul names that God is near to us but he also acknowledges that we grope for God, we search for God. He challenges the idea that God can be contained within gold, silver, or stone, that which we fashion for ourselves. But he does not deny that the journey toward faithfulness to God is not without missteps on the part of one and all.

I think it is important to provide some context to this time and place. Listen to these words that were also to be found etched in stone at that time. "I was not. I was. I am not. I do not care." This was a popular inscription on tombstones in the Hellenistic period. Let me repeat it one more time, "I was not. I was. I am not. I do not care." What a profound lack of meaning and purpose to all of existence. And it was in fact so popular that often only the first initials were used in the way "RIP" has been used in more recent times, to signify "Rest in Peace." This etching denies both the value and meaning of life, and the hope of everlasting life.

It is clear there was a potent cultural current of nihilism which was devoid of meaningfulness and hope. Paul is in a debate about the nature of the identity of God and how we find meaning. But those to whom he is preaching are in search of God. And being in search of God, they are in search of meaningfulness. There is common ground to be found here. There

is a place to gather and a language to share about our yearning for what is beyond us.

As we think about this text we need to be careful about where we place ourselves in this story. Our first reaction might be to find ourselves standing beside Paul and nodding enthusiastically as he condemns all of the idolatry. We picture ourselves knowingly calling out "Amen" as he preaches of a God who is the creator and preserver of all things. But I am not sure that is where we are standing. Not because we do not seek to follow Jesus as Paul followed him, but because we do not hold all of the cards; we do not possess all of the answers; we do not understand all of the mysteries of the divine. Our own journeys toward the divine include their own share of idolatry. They place us in the crowd to whom Paul is preaching. We may not craft objects and worship them. But in our attempts to comprehend who God is we have all run through our own share of idolatrous notions. We have all fashioned Gods of our own making to serve our own needs.

I have to say I am a little jealous of this altar to an "unknown God." It is not that I believe God is not known to us in Jesus Christ. But when we believe God is fully known to us we fall into a trap. We fill in the blanks of what we do not know with what suits our own purposes. We create a God that just happens to agree with all of our life choices. We create a God that just happens to agree with all of our political positions. We create a God, rather than inviting God to continue to create us. Perhaps we would be well suited, not to have an altar to an unknown God, but an altar to the unknown depths of God. We could use a reminder that in all things related to the divine we are humble seekers not experts with answers.

When we fill in the parts of God we do not know with our own idolatrous answers we can lose sight of the parts of God we have had revealed to us in Jesus Christ. However, if we continue to pursue a deeper understanding of God, proclaiming that we do not yet have all of the answers, we can firmly grasp the truth we have received in Jesus Christ.

Soren Kierkegaard argued that we can never have a perfected system of philosophy or theology, "because the world and people in it are always in a state of becoming..." He then goes on to write we must instead seek after, "a persistent striving for truth."

This may create a feeling of uncertainty for some of us. Not having all of the answers can feel as if we are lacking a foundation. But it is not our responsibility to have the foundation or be the foundation. That responsibility falls on someone else's shoulders. Jon Walton, the former Senior Pastor at The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, and my minister when I was growing up, said it like this, "We are God's children, and for all of the questions that remain about our faith, the glass into which we look dimly this side of the veil, we do have a resolute and clear confidence: that in spite of our not knowing, we are known; that beyond what we do not understand, we are understood." I would add, and knowing this is perhaps all we need to know.

Our journey of faith takes us on a long and winding path. On one side is the risk of descending into nihilism. Because we do not have all of the answers we can start to believe there are no answers; there is no meaning in the world; there is no God at work in our lives. On the other side we risk being dogmatic and sure of all who God is. Because we do not have all of the

answers we create the answers for ourselves and become idolatrous.

The path we are called to walk upon is one that cherishes and holds fast to what we do know about our God and how the divine is present in our lives; the path Jesus invites us to walk on each new day. It is a path of humility. It is a path that acknowledges we exist in the midst of mystery. It is also a path of steadfast hope. We are not called by God to have all of the answers. We are called by God to follow who Paul followed, Jesus Christ. We are called to "a persistent striving for truth." We are called to recognize that we do not fully know God, but God fully knows us. And we are called to trust that will be enough to lead us forward toward the divine on each new day.

And by the way, have I mentioned how lovely you all look today?

Thanks be to God. Amen.