

To An Unknown God

A Sermon Expositing Acts 17:22-31

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

You have been working on a bit of art, or at least I hope you have. I invited you earlier in this hour to sculpt or draw or write or in some way bring together an image of God as you know God. Do feel free to keep working on that and I'll give you instructions in a few minutes with what to do with the other, blank piece of paper or unformed clay or playdough or whatever it is you have. Before that, in just a moment I want to give a brave soul or two or three the opportunity to share what they've done briefly, so be ready to move closer to your camera if necessary and show and in a sentence or two describe your work and what it means.

For some, if you boiled all of this life, all of faith down to its most basic purpose, what you are doing in that art is it – or rather what you are doing is a culmination of your having been doing the most important thing – knowing God.

Within Christianity and indeed within virtually all theocentric faiths it is hard to argue that there is anything more important or foundational than coming to know God. Those who follow Jesus closely might attempt to argue that in his life Jesus never sent *people* away even when they interrupted his time of reflection and solace. We could say that knowing and serving people was more important to Jesus than relating to God. But if we hold, as most Christians have, that God is originator of all people and indeed that people are made in the image of God then our getting to know and our serving others is a sort of sub-heading in the pursuit of getting to know God. So too for those who tend to forefront a moral or ethical framework as the centerpiece of their faith. Even if the *rules* were the most important part of faith you would have to define very carefully what is right and wrong. From a theistic worldview then you must *know God* before you can follow God's rules. Many of the religious regulations we read of in scripture also have as their defined purpose – getting to know God. You see, whatever we might think is at the center of life and faith it might fairly be argued that it is a part of getting to know God.

It makes sense then that we, the church and its people, have worked so hard to facilitate knowing God. We hold educational programming that attempts to give us varied lenses through which to see and learn about God. We worship each week with a central hope of not learning about God, but perhaps in our intentionality having an encounter with God. We have done a great deal to facilitate knowing God and I'd like to demonstrate that now:

Are there any willing to share what you've drawn, sculpted, created – this is a kind of demonstration of what we know about God and there are no poor pieces, there are no bad answers?

You see, the church is not lacking in the ability to assist in coming to know God. Some would say that we have fulfilled the lesson of our reading from Acts today. In that reading the Apostle Paul stands in a venue known to be the site of much sophisticated rhetorical presentation – an almost literal marketplace of ideas – and there he speaks to a crowd of Athenians many of whom in turn, “come to know God” as we sometimes use the phrase. We often read this story through the eyes and in the perspective of the apostle who with a few words moved a people from holding a view of the transcendent divine that was summarized in one place by an altar to

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

an unknown God to truly knowing God. The unspoken assumption then is that we, the modern church, should go and do the same - help people know God.

If that is how we read this story, if that is our goal then we have a problem. Study after study after study are being released year after year after year telling us that much of the world – most of the world – are not interested in knowing God at all. If the moral of this story is that we, the church, should be making God known we're not living up to its standards. Christianity has made a name for itself as being opposed to science. I remember thinking, "Do the people who are pitting biblical creation stories against scientific inquiry realize that the method and mode they are challenging are the same method and mode that gave them technology or medicine!?" I long for those quaint days when the anti-science debate was merely literary to return. My assumption was that recognizing that life-sustaining and saving technologies have benefited from science would cause them to have to reconcile their faith with a modern worldview. I was wrong. Instead the proliferation of misinformation on things like vaccines comes largely from people of faith, that is from people who know God. Is it any surprise that so many of the voices of misinformation pushing against the very measures that have saved lives during this pandemic have come from churches!? We know that not all people of faith share that perspective of science and related public policy, but the general public hears daily the voices of those who know God and know that God stands against science.

We've seen the same thing play out in the moral sphere of our shared life. Not all Christians share the prevailing views, but if you surveyed those who are disinterested in God about those who are (as indeed we have many times over) you would find their experience to be of a people who are unified in upholding a singular, punishing, moralistic ethic for all. People who have an identity unconsidered by those who know God, or who do not toe the social line, or who have bent immigration regulations in pursuit of safety and sustenance, or who have a chosen family in place of a nuclear family, or...the list goes on...are understood to be outside the "will of God." And let us not even begin with the way God is portrayed in American political discourse. It may be that the only bipartisan statement still made in our world, "God is obviously on *our* side," say we all.

Friends, the problem with twenty-first century Christianity is not that we don't know God well enough; it's that we know God too well. Or at least we think we do. You see we are constantly doing what you are doing right now – sculpting or drawing or in some way shaping an image of God – and that's a good thing. There is truth to the idea that our central pursuit as people of faith is the pursuit of knowing God. That means we should always hold a kind of mental image or image of the heart of who God is and what that means about the way we go about our lives. Our problem is that we've too often chiseled a really specific image of God in stone. It's both of these things, the "chiseled in stone," and the "really specific" that make our knowledge of God problematic.

You see, humans are really quite terrible at conceiving of things outside our own experience. In fact, the most creative people on the planet are not really people who can imagine entirely new realities; they are people who are able to be so broadly inspired by what already exists that something fresh and beautiful arises from within. We have the same limitation when we conceive of God. No human has ever said or believed anything about God that is not couched in language or images or concepts borrowed from our daily experience. Try on your own time. Say something about God that isn't a kind of metaphor. I promise you can't do it. So our images of God are necessarily always informed by and grounded in our singular experience. That's not bad in itself. It is good that we learn about God as we go through life, even that we ponder the depths of specific qualities or attributes of God. It is also good that we believe a few things about God that we're not willing to easily rethink. I believe that God is good, period. You can bring up the question of theodicy, why does bad stuff happen in the world when God is in charge? I don't know, but God is good, humph! {arms crossed}. But these two things together become a problem when *everything* we say of God is unchanging *and* very specific. A woman who knows a thing or two about shaking up people's image of God by the way she speaks, writes, and lives, Anne Lamott, is famous for illustrating this point by saying, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

So what if Paul isn't the hero of our story today? I don't mean he's the villain, I just mean what if in the time we're living it's the particular action of the Athenians we should celebrate? They are the ones who had among their conception of the divine a single altar to an unknown god. Yes, they had many other gods each with well defined and stone-chiseled attributes, but as they scanned the heavens and tried to describe that transcendent reality we call "God" they recognized that they did not know everything. It was their recognition that they didn't know God entirely that allowed them to hear what Paul had to say about God that day. For that matter, Paul himself once a murderous persecutor of an entire group of people due to their religious identity became a new person when God took away his vision on the Damascus road. Only when his physical sight was taken did he realize how little of God he could see.

Knowing God is a very good thing, but not knowing God (or recognizing how little we know of God) is as much or more important. Not knowing God is what allows us to be in conversation with others who don't share our view of God or the world of God's creation. It is what allows us to learn from one another and to employ mercy, grace and humility in our faith. In a sense not knowing God is what allows us to know one another, which is what helps us to know God.

You have another sheet of blank paper or a formless lump of clay there with you, yes? Here's your assignment for preparing that one to sit alongside the one you've been working on. Write at the bottom or scratch into its surface the words, "To an unknown God." Then leave it alone.
Amen.