

Meeting the Unknown God

Acts 17: 22-28a

Paul came a long way in his life. He was a hate-filled persecutor of the followers of Jesus and became Christianity's most passionate and influential advocate. Now, in the Greek city of Athens, he addresses a group of philosophers. He tries to persuade them about the truth of his belief that God was in Jesus to bring about the reconciliation of all people to God. Paul meets them where they are and tries to persuade them. He addresses them with the assurance that their unknown God is real, with the assertion that the real God is present, and with the great news that God's nature and purpose is love.

This a pretty powerful message and it rings true in our day as well. Paul goes on to assert that the way to know about this unknown God – about God's identity, nature, and purpose – is to get to know Jesus. To see God, look at Jesus. He makes an important distinction that we need to hear clearly. Paul argues not to interpret Jesus by what we already think about God. We should not take our images of God and stick them onto Jesus, as though we know enough about God to project those attributes onto anyone. The reverse is actually what's true. If you want to know about God's nature, God's purposes, and God's identity, look at Jesus and you'll see.

That's why I'm a Christian, a follower of Jesus. I want to know what God is like and what God is doing, so I look to Jesus. I am committed to following the Jesus way as I understand it through the Bible, in this faith community, and in my own experience.

It's not that there is no other way to know about God. Other world religions, philosophies, and even sciences touch something of the nature of God. They all reveal something about God. Faith in Christ shows us a clear way to see about God by looking to Jesus. Unfortunately, that means you often have to look past Christians. Jesus don't miss seeing Jesus.

What does this story mean for us? To find that meaning, we need to consider the three questions behind Paul's sermon. "Who is the unknown God?" "How do we meet the unknown God?" "What difference does that meeting make in our lives?" Another way to think about that last question is to ask, "What will change for me as I personally encounter God?"

Who is the unknown God? Let's affirm what Paul said in some modern language. The unknown God is the God who is God, the ultimate reality, the ground and abyss of all being, and being itself. God is the common ground of all physical existence and all its meaning (from Paul Tillich).

God, in his ultimate depths, is unknowable to us. I'm sure understand what all this means, but clearly it is large language about what is ultimate. In this sense, God is largely beyond our knowing.

The unknown God is the source of all we know and the source of creation itself. God is the Cause before all causes. Dr. Timothy Johnson, in his book *Finding God in the Questions*, provides some interesting information about the origins of the universe. First

of all, the universe is estimated to be 13 to 15 billion years old. He offers this description of its beginning:

In the blink of an eye, our current cosmos burst forth from a pinpoint of extremely dense and hot “quark-gluon plasma” (a tiny dot of free-wheeling quark particles and the gluons binding them).

Scientists call this the “Big Bang.” Before the Bang, there was no space anywhere. Everything was contained in the pinpoint. It suddenly burst forth “like a balloon inflating from nothing. During the first trillion-trillion-trillionth of a second, matter and anti-matter flickered in and out of existence. The fate of the universe hung precariously in the balance,” then took off growing. It is still expanding, and more rapidly than ever. I don’t understand much of it, but it’s a cool description.

You may ask, “What preceded the Big Bang?” One world-renowned cosmologist said it this way, “You just go back to the beginning and that’s it.” God is our answer to what preceded the Big Bang – God not as a Being, but as being itself.

This is not a new theology. This is not an effort to change who God is. It is a reinterpreting of our understanding. It is a process of letting our understanding of God evolve. Each generation is challenged to interpret “the divine depth of our existence” in the context of our language, our culture, and our experience”. Paul stated this same truth with clarity, precision, and beauty, saying that God is the reality in whom “we live, and move, and have our being.”

The unknown God is clearly cosmic. Paul goes on to say that God is also personal. It’s a truth seen in Jesus and reaffirmed by outstanding theologians of our time. God is personal. This is symbolic language indicated that ultimate truth actually “grasps the center of our personality.” (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*) Ultimate Truth comes into the core of our own being and thereby overcomes our loneliness, anxiety, and despair. One of my favorite theologians, Paul Tillich (*Theology of Culture*) said it this way: “Our personal center [our deepest self] is grasped by the manifestation of the inaccessible ground and abyss of being.”

Now that we know who the unknown God is, how do we meet this God? How do we relate to ultimate truth? The simple answer is that we remember. Do you remember the Big Bang? At least, do you remember the discussion a few minutes ago? We are products of the source of that cosmic explosion. God, who was before it, is still in it. The memory of God is our very cells as though we were *hard-wired* for God. It’s like the story told in Marcus Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity* about the little girl with a brand new baby brother. She insisted on seeing the baby alone. With some trepidation, the parents agreed, and anxiously listened through the baby monitor for what would happen. They heard their daughter’s footsteps cross the room to the crib, and then heard to say softly to her new brother, “Quick, tell me about God. I’ve almost forgotten.”

The core belief of our faith is that we encounter this ultimate, this God, in Jesus and that Jesus lives as the Spirit in the center of each of us. We just have to remember. We have to remember and pay attention. God meets us in the living of our lives. God

is revealed in our relationships. God becomes tangible to us as we step out in faith, as we put love and justice into practice, and as we truth in our freedom to question and to seek. God comes to be known in us and it's up to us to notice. It's us to us to help each other notice.

What difference does this make? How will we be changed as a result of meeting the unknown God -- who became known in Jesus and who becomes known within us? What does this mean for Crossroads Church and for each of us?

The difference this makes is this: when we recognize that God is God – and how often we don't – then God becomes God for us. God, then, occupies first place in everything. We will, then, sort out all our priorities based on the first priority – God. We will find our identity and direction in what we know of the nature and purposes of God whom we see clearly in Jesus. The purpose of the Christian religion, of biblical scholarship, and of spiritual growth is to see Jesus more clearly and, therefore, to see God more clearly day by day.

When God is the first priority, our consuming task is to strengthen our memory of God by deepening that relationship and by getting clearer about what God's Spirit will look like in our skin. It means:

- making life-direction choices based on the potential God has given to us.
- considering how to serve God in all our relationships, in work situations, or in school.
- Basing career and other vocational choices on the Spirit's guidance.

When God is the first priority of our faith community, we will focus our lives by the vision and direction we perceive through the Spirit. We will be committed:

- to the church's life, its integrity and its ministry.
- to participating fully in its life and ministry.
- To supporting its ministries financially through regular commitment and support of the general ministries budget of the church.

In these days, an important part of the vision of this congregation is represented by the capital campaign and our efforts to move forward to find a building to support our ministry and help it grow and expand. In this effort, as in all our lives as church, our task is to let our relationship with God, and our commitment to Jesus, lead us to live love, to live justice, to live compassion, and to be peace. This is the way Jesus showed us. It is still the way.

Earlier in the service, we sang the song *Kyrie Eleison*. Its usual translation is, "Lord, have mercy on us." Another translation, suggested by Henri Nouwen, is this: "Lord, drawn compassion from us." Can we let this be our prayerful request as a community of committed followers of Christ?

How does God drawn compassion from us? Again, let us look to the example of Jesus. God will draw from us passionate commitment. Love will be the light for our path. We will be committed to this community and to the Gospel imperatives:

- giving sight to the blind,
- giving freedom to all captives,
- sharing the good news about God's intentions to all people.

Jesus reveals a clear image of the nature of God within the context of a human life. Jesus loved and calls us to love. Jesus sacrificed and calls us to live sacrificially. Love always involves some sacrifice. When we take our primary relationship seriously (God), we will shape our lives according to that relationship. We will let everything be subservient to that highest priority. For a modal, let us look to Jesus: as described in the New Testament, as experienced in the community of faith, and as experienced in our own lives.

Being church, as followers of Jesus, involves sacrifice. There is the sacrifice of time and energy to the community. There is the sacrifice of money to support that community. There is the sacrifice seen in efforts to explore the meaning of our theological beliefs in terms of our present experience and understanding. There is the sacrifice of letting, of reaching out, and of stretching ourselves.

The capital campaign in which we are engaged will involve sacrificial giving over and above the consistent support of our ongoing ministry through the budget. The vision of the campaign requires sacrificial giving to bring to reality the vision of a building to enable the ministry of this congregation to grow and flourish.

The invitation I extend to you today is to embrace the vision of Crossroads as church, a vision that includes both ongoing ministry and the capital campaign. In so doing, we affirm our commitment to God's reality, God's presence, and God's invitation to us to be who we say we are: God's church, here and now.

Prayer (adapted from the Crossroads Capital Campaign Prayer)

Creator God

We seek your wisdom in the living of our lives, as your church, and in the progress of our capital campaign.

We desire to be church not just for us, but for those you would have us serve;

To be church for the future and not just for the present moment;

To be a community of growth and challenge, and a people to carry out your peace and your justice,

To be a place of liberty, inclusion, and hospitality as we understand all these things through Jesus.

We affirm our faith in you, O God, the one who acts with us yesterday, today, and forever. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.