

“To an Unknown God”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Acts 17:16-31
August 5, 2018
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

My family believes strongly in the power of the store-bought greeting card. My dad and stepmom send cards for birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas and Easter — but also for Thanksgiving, St. Patrick’s Day, Valentine’s Day, and Franke Valle’s birthday. That last one is a joke, but only because it’s not my dad who’s actually picking out these cards.

In an attempt to keep up with the Genaus, I find myself frustrated in the card aisle at the grocery store, or Target, or an actual Hallmark location, poring over a catalog of the bland, the gaudy, the twee, the obnoxiously loud, and the vague. I am searching for a card that doesn’t simply tell the recipient that I am able to operate both a calendar and a mailbox, but that I know what kind of card they would like, that I know their sense of humor (or lack thereof), or, in the case of the cards I send my brother, that I know the exact kind of card that would make them the most uncomfortable. I want them to know that I *know* them.

Two weeks ago, EPC member Bob Burney celebrated his ninetieth birthday. I called Bob that afternoon and he told me about the celebration at the veterans’ home and all the wonderful cards he had received. Bob and his VA community had voted one of the cards “Winner in the Category of Comedy.” It was from Deacon and Elder Don Hagan. On the front, amid a field of stars and planets, it read: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

When Bob opened the card he found the message: “So, tell me, what was that like?” Delighted, Bob mailed Don a note with three Monopoly dollars he’d acquired in a game of Bingo earlier that week. You can’t send that kind of lovingly teasing birthday card to just anybody. Too risky. You send that card to someone you know.

Bob has told me many times of how he’s been known by this congregation. When Bob and his wife visited other Birmingham churches, they were politely greeted as “Mr. and Mrs. Burney.” But when they showed up at Edgewood, they were “Bob and Helen,” and that meant the world to them. Bob refers to this congregation as his family. You should know that Bob speaks his mind and always tells the truth and I think he knows the body of Christ when he sees it.

It’s strange, isn’t it, the journey we make when we come to a new church? First we are visitors and we worry about doing the right thing at the right time, completely unaware that the congregation — if it’s worth its salt of the earth — is just as worried about making a good impression and that the pastor sweats a little, hoping everyone will behave and be welcoming and that the visitor won’t walk out mid-sermon (or worse, fall asleep).

Then, if we hang around, slowly but surely, we become known to some people and they become known to us. And who those people are is often surprising. We discover connections and friends-in-common and we share books and Netflix recommendations and maybe brunch. And time starts slipping and, whether we officially join the church or not, we are known in some small way by just about everybody. And then one day we find ourselves doing some weird churchy task that should be boring but is oddly fun with these strange people around helping out and we all make a joke about how the pastor roped us into this work.

Finally, we've been around long enough that one day a new face appears in the pews and we recognize the anxious smile of a visitor and we realize that they don't know the difference between us and someone who's been here fifteen years. And we worry about making a good impression and we hope that this new person will let the congregation come to know them.

I'm reminded of this idea of *being known* each year on Youth Sunday, when our high school seniors get up and, with eloquence that distorts our images of them as goofy kids, tells us that EPC gave them space to come to know themselves and how very known they feel as they leave the nest and how, collectively, you showed them that you know God.

The apostle Paul was in Athens because he'd had to flee violent opposition to his preaching and teaching. (On a side note: if anyone wants to get annoyed at one of my sermons and send me to Greece, I'm sure we can work that out.) Paul does his usual thing, heading for the synagogue to preach and debate. When he goes to the marketplace, some philosophers want to know more. He seems to be a babbler — one who throws around words scattershot like a careless gardener tosses seeds. Or maybe he's "a proclaimer of foreign divinities" — which was a dangerous thing to be doing. He's brought to the Areopagus — Mars Hill — down from the Acropolis on a rock outcropping, the place where the highest government leaders met and trials were held. There, Paul is asked to explain himself.

He begins with, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." We were just told that the idols he saw everywhere in the city distressed him deeply. So it's hard to tell if this mention of Athenian religiosity is a compliment to butter them up so they'll listen to him, or rather a sarcastic remark, or perhaps a little of both.

He continues, "...as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'" And Paul rolls up his sleeves and says, "Let me tell you about this 'unknown God,' y'all."

He explains that the God he knows, the God who knows him — the one God who created heaven and earth — doesn't live in temples or shrines or statues. Of course, the Athenians already knew that, but Paul goes deeper. God is not served by human hands, God has no need of idols. This way of worshipping is off. Idols are a way of convincing ourselves that we have control. We can please the gods, get them on our side. And thus we'll have control over our lives, drawing the gods to our purposes.¹ We just need to get everyone on the same page.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, p, 177

But the unknown-to-Athens God gives “to all mortals life and breath and all things.” This God is close at hand and longs to be sought and encountered and known. God is not frozen in gold or silver or marble, but is alive and moving and working through this world in life and death and resurrection. “In him we live and move and have our being.” And here Paul is quoting words not from Hebrew scriptures, but from an ode to Zeus written by the poet Aratus and it would seem that this Greek world, too, is known by the babblers and the God he proclaims.

It’s important to note that Paul didn’t bring God — nor Jesus, nor the Holy Spirit — to the Athenians. God was already there. God is always there. So close. Not far from each one of us.

I suppose we could stop here and wag our fingers at the Athenians — silly Ancient Greeks! But you know better. We don’t craft idols in quite the same way, but... John Calvin said, “The human mind is a perpetual factory for idols.”² You’ve heard the list before: money, status, celebrity, nationalism, ideology, fear, success — the things we have a nasty habit of putting ahead of God, convincing ourselves that we can find meaning and life through them. If each of our minds were a city for Paul to traipse through, what altars and temples would he find?

Idols are what we — consciously or subconsciously — believe will lead us to the higher power. They give us that same illusion of control that the altars offered the Athenians. This is not how we come to know God.

If Paul was deeply distressed by Athenian idols, imagine what he would find in our time. The idols he saw are museum pieces today, but new idols abound, some of them in churches. He would find Christians behaving badly left and right. He would find congregations lamenting their empty pews. He would find a lot to preach about.

He would also find a whole lot of people continuing to ask what theologian Paul Tillich called “questions of ultimate concern.” In our ever-troubled world, he would find people seeking meaning, groping for answers, and hungry for hope. He would find seekers of an unknown God. He would wonder if anyone is testifying about the God he knows in Christ Jesus.

And to all of this, I think Paul would bring very much the same message. He would preach repentance — “metanoia” (μετάνοια) in the Greek — which really just means “opening your mind” or “making your understanding bigger” or “expanding your comprehension” in turning to a new direction. He would preach about a God who longs to be known and he’d tell us how this God sent him to Athens, of all places. That God desired to be known there, and that there were some in that city who came to believe. And that, as he left Athens for Corinth, he knew that even those who didn’t buy anything he was offering would, for the rest of their Athenian lives, never again look at their altar to an unknown god in the same way.

Paul would remind us that, despite our divisions, God made all the nations from one blood. He would tell us not to seek answers that require sacrifices in order to keep our heads just above water as we seek to please lifeless idols of stone. Instead, to look for God in submersion and letting go and giving ourselves over to the God who has already sacrificed everything for us.

Look for God not in marble, but in a body — a living body, a dying body, a resurrected body. The body of Christ, of which we are each a part.

² quoted in William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 144

In the life of our congregation we celebrate life, death, and resurrection each Sunday when we gather as the Community of the Known. Along the way, we celebrate weddings and baptisms and graduations and new jobs and new stages of life as God is revealed to us in new ways. And, we don't put this on the website, but frankly, we've been doing pretty excellent funerals in this place for the past thirty years or so. If you haven't been to one, you might ask, "What makes an excellent funeral?" And we would tell you that an excellent funeral is simply one in which God is known in worship, and the beloved of God who has died is deeply known by those who gather and pray and sing and preach.

We come to this place to be known and to know our God more fully. We will gather at a table that is all about being known. As Christ took bread and broke it and blessed it and gave it — eyes were opened in that upper room to the fact that something was up. And then, on the third day, when he took and broke and blessed and gave, disciples' eyes were again opened, and they recognized him. In bread and cup, Christ is known to us. He is not a figment, a hunch in the dark, or a hedged bet for everlasting life. He is the risky gift of being known — a risky gift from God for each of us. Amen.