

“The Unknown God”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Gospel Lesson: Acts 17:22-27

At the Taizé Community in Burgundy, France, the monastic brothers living there worship three times a day around mealtimes. Thousands of visitors worship right alongside them – candlelight upfront; scripture readings; and repetitive, sung prayers, just like we do during our Taizé services leading up to Easter.

The meals they serve visitors are called *glop* – or at least that’s what Yuri and I called them. Lunch and Dinner are one ladle of stewed beans or vegetables – typically brown or grey – a little bread and cheese, and a cup of water. Breakfast is even more meager – a little bread and butter, a small stick of chocolate or a bit of jam (but not both), and a cup of coffee. By the time lunch comes around, you’re hungry for a scoop of that *glop*, and thankful.

Lunch comes right after worship. On Wednesday of our weeklong stay, as Yuri and I sat in the worship space cross-legged on the carpeted concrete floor preparing for the songs to begin, I wrote in my journal: “I’m so hungry, Lord. With what shall you feed me?” “I shall feed you mind, body and soul – just enough to keep you hungry – so that you may continue to grow.”

In that experience, I got to know God – and myself – in a new way. Few of us prayerfully endure physical hunger. Those who have practiced fasting as a spiritual encounter – and not just to get a blood test – they know God in a deeper and fuller way, what God has to offer them, what God longs for them to experience and know, where God is leading them.

In today’s New Testament Lesson, the Apostle Paul is committed to helping the people of Athens know God in a deeper and fuller way.

Last week, we heard about Paul traveling to Rome, the seat of power and authority, and in doing so, he proclaimed God’s power and authority over and against any governmental authority or elected official or national ruler, and particularly those who do not respect divine authority and embody a peaceable, caring spirit.

This week, Paul takes the Gospel message to Athens, the seat of worldly wisdom. And his first observation is that worldly wisdom alone is not sufficient for knowing God. Paul says to the people of Athens, “I found among (the objects of your worship) an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’” That’s shocking! - that he found an unknown god among the Athens people. These people took pride in the power of knowledge and wisdom, believing that it above all else could explain the world around them and who they were as individuals and as a people – their identity, their place in the world.

And Paul is saying, “You don’t know everything; can’t know everything, in and of yourself.” Paul is telling them that as much as they know and as great as they are at figuring things out, there will always be something greater. And that something – that someone – is the Lord, God Almighty! That is the first step in knowing the fullness of God and all God’s blessings – knowing that we don’t know everything and that there is something greater than ourselves.

Do you remember when you first got the sense that there is something greater than yourself – greater than humankind – more wise, all-knowing, all-powerful, full of compassion and grace, something filling the world with light where there is otherwise darkness, love that drives out hate, such plenty and abundance that no one need go without, an abiding sense of comfort and healing amid illness and disease. Knowing and believing that God is there for us and for all creation is the first step.

The second and even more critical step is experiencing and embracing a need to know God more, to draw closer to the Lord, to delve deeper into the mysteries of our faith. Sadly, that's where many of us fall short. We are like the Athenians Paul encountered – smart, reasonable, self-assured people capable of so much that little seems out of our reach, as human beings, as a culture. Too many people in this community, too many people we know, too many of us here today have, to some extent, put God up on an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." We're happy to know God exists, but not all that interested in doing what's needed to learn more, experience more, grow more in the faith. To take that second step of delving deeper into the mysteries of our faith we need to stay hungry when it comes to knowing God. Never let yourself be so satisfied in your relationship with God that you leave God on an altar somewhere and go about your life.

How do we stay hungry for God?

Well, you know the answer to that. Through prayer; by reading the Bible as well as books by religious or spiritual thinkers; by attending worship, Sunday school and Bible studies; taking prayerful, meditative walks in nature; giving of your time, talents and treasures sacrificially – that is, giving in a way that really has you wonder if you're giving too much, if you'll have enough for yourself, if maybe you might even go a little hungry.

That's how we stay hungry for God. That's how to approach worship and service and study with empty bellies, so to speak. That's what has us ask the Lord, "With what shall you feed me?" and then hear in response, "I shall feed you mind, body and soul – just enough to keep you hungry – so that you may continue to grow."

A grandfather was digging potatoes along with his grandson. After several hours of hard work, the little boy looked up into his grandfather's eyes and asked, "Why did you bury all these things here?" And the grandfather answered, "This is God's doing." In other words, God leaves us hidden blessings just below the surface so that we keep digging for them. They're always within our reach, if we make the effort.

Put another way, God shrouds our faith in mystery so that we keep searching for that which will truly feed us, sustain us, and help us grow in the faith, and so that we will help others come to faith in God and welcome Christ deeper into their lives.

It's not enough for us to know and love God and then attend only to our own spiritual growth – though that is critical to our wellbeing. But beyond our own wellbeing, we are called to look after others. How do we create or unleash a hunger for God in others, a hunger that draws them into a community of faith like this one?

Well, Paul was doing just that when he shared the Gospel of Christ with the people of Athens. To do that – to awaken them to the faith – Paul simply told them who he knew God to be, saying, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you," and then he goes on to describe God as Creator, Ruler, present and active, giving and sustaining. And then Paul takes it one step further, saying how personal God is and how we are all connected to one another through Christ.

Paul says, "From one ancestor, (God) made all nations to inhabit the whole earth." In other words, God is global, God touches all people, and God binds all of us together as brothers and sister in Christ.

If you were to look at the people in your life as current or potential brothers and sister in Christ, wouldn't it only be natural to connect with them on a deeper level? Our calling as Christians is to prayerfully consider how God could and would use us as an instrument of greater faith and deeper spiritual growth, for that person, in your life, who you're thinking of right now, someone who would be blessed by going deeper in the faith, if only someone like you would reach out in the knowledge and love of God, and of God's only son our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Lord God, you are not in some far off place detached from our lives. You are right here with us, longing for us to see you more clearly, and love you more dearly, follow you more nearly day by day – as if our lives and the lives of our friends and neighbors, family and loved ones depended on it. Because they do. We need a deeper connection to you, one that has us reach out on your behalf to those people who need to feel your presence and blessing in their lives, people like that one person each of us thought of and some of us even wrote down at the start of this sermon series. Activate our faith this week, O Lord, for the sake of that person and others for your sake and the sake of the world you love and came to save. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, despite assurances that you are good and loving, despite reminders that you are the ever-watchful keeper of our lives, we still struggle to trust you.

We find it difficult to hope in what is unseen, to believe in what we cannot prove, to take the leap of faith that walking with you requires.

But Lord, how we want to believe! How we want to let go of our need to control, and rest instead in your ever-loving and gracious arms!

Free us, we pray, to trust this day to you, that we may walk with you as did our ancestor in faith, Abraham.

Hear our prayers as we pray the prayer that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**