

Acts 17:22-31 *Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 29Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Next weekend, our President or one of his higher staff will lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. This tomb has been there since shortly after WWI and honors those whose bodies were recovered from war but never identified. It's an interesting part of our culture that we honor those who are unknown to us. The soldiers who guard the tomb do not wear rank on their uniforms so as not to outrank whoever is in that tomb. The tomb is guarded every second of every day. They are so precise in their ceremonies to honor the unknown soldiers that exact steps are worn into the concrete where the guards walk. It is wonderful to have this as part of our culture that not only do we honor those who are known, but also those who are unknown.

Today in our text, Paul picks up on this concept of the unknown—though he is not talking about soldiers. He's talking about God. To many people God is unknown. They know by nature that there is a god and that they've sinned against that god, but they don't know who that god is or what he's done to save them. The same was true in Paul's day. As he spoke to the people of Athens, Paul revealed to these unbelieving people who the true God is and what he's done to save them. What a blessing that God is not unknown to us. He has come to us through Word and Sacrament and revealed himself as the God who loves us and gave his life to rescue us from our sin so we can live with him forever. As we celebrate our God who has chosen to reveal himself to us, God leads us to respond in obedience to him and live a life of love that honors and worship him as God of all. Part of this life of love and obedience is carrying out the mission God has given to each one of us to make him known throughout the world! What a joy and what a privilege! Today Paul encourages us: **Make God Known to the World!**

Athens was the greatest cultural center of its time. Some of the world's greatest philosophers and poets came out of Athens: Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates and Plato to name a few. The Areopagus had at one time been the ruling council of the city but over time had morphed into the place where new ideas were thrown out, debated and thought about. Using terms from today, it was a progressive society. They prided themselves in suggesting and thinking about the newest and latest things. They were constantly floating the newest religious ideas to find ones that would take root and run. They were very much about progressing in thought and society. Yet, despite their intellectual prowess, they were spiritually ignorant and deeply idolatrous. These men may have been extremely smart, yet the true God was unknown to them. They were enamored with spirituality but ignorant of the true God.

Paul sought to change that. He had been brought to the Areopagus to continue a discussion he had started about the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. They wanted to hear him further develop his thoughts and ideas. What a great opportunity for Paul to reveal who the true God really was to people who thought they had all the answers. The tactic Paul used was brilliant. He started with what they knew and led them to what they did not know. It was obvious walking around the city that these were religious people. It has been said that there were more gods in Athens than men. Towering over the Areopagus was the Parthenon, the temple to the patron goddess of Athens, Athena, whom they felt to be their protector. Temples and objects of worship were everywhere. Yet Paul found one altar that had the inscription, "To an Unknown God." You might say that this altar served the same purpose as the miscellaneous category on our budget. It covered any god they might have missed. I think we can understand their logic. It makes sense to believe that if a god came to Athens and didn't have a temple, he would be mad and angry with them. Now the Athenians could say they had a shrine for him, he just wasn't known to them.

Paul picked up on this and said to them, "You did miss a god. You missed the true God! But I'm going to tell you about him." He went on to reveal to them the God they missed. They missed the personal God who created the world. This would have been a shocking teaching to them as most of them followed a pantheistic view of things. Pantheism means that God is in everything. Pantheists do not believe in a personal, creator God, but rather equate God to the Universe or Nature-like "Mother Earth" for instance. Many don't even use the word "God." But Paul wasn't done shocking them. This God also doesn't live in temples built by human hands nor is he served by human hands as if he needed anything from them. This goes right along with the concept of a creator God. He didn't come from us. He isn't something that we made up. He was always here. He created us and gave us life. He doesn't need our worship or praise or money or food or anything. He isn't dependent upon humans in any way. He is the creator who made all the people on earth. In fact, he is so involved with his creation that he determined the times set for them and the places they should live. It is in him alone that we live and move and have our being. Everything we are and everything we have comes from him. He is not an image that man created but a divine being.

In a not so subtle way, Paul was hitting directly at the idolatry that was so present in the hearts of these people. God isn't something you can make up or make be whoever you want him to be. He is the divine being who created this world and everything in it and wants his people to worship him by living as he wants them to live. In the past, God overlooked this ignorance. Please understand that doesn't mean he excused their ignorance. It simply means he continued to give people time to see the errors of their ways, repent and turn to him for forgiveness and life which lasts beyond this life and into eternity. The urgency of this message is that this God will also come back to this earth to judge the world according to whether they believed in him and if their lives gave testimony to that.

To those who listened, this was an entirely new teaching. And reactions were mixed. Some sneered, some wanted to hear more and we are told in the verses following our text that some believed. What a timely text this is! We see so many parallels to our world today. Paul was preaching to people who were enamored with spirituality but were ignorant of the true God. He was talking with people who thought they had all the answers but had missed the knowledge about the true God who was unknown to them. I can't help but see the same thing around us today. Our world is enamored with "spirituality" but ignorant of the true God. We still live in a very religious world. It may not seem that way. We might think people are trying to do away with religion altogether, yet talk about spirituality is all around us. New religious ideas are being floated about society every single day. With the internet and other communication tools today, we are constantly bombarded with the latest and greatest religious ideas. People are searching to be more spiritual every day and yet completely miss the true God. Like the Athenians, many today try to make God be whom they want him to be. Rather than worshipping him as the one who created them, they try to create them to be the God they imagine in their heads. As much of what Paul said was shocking to the people who were listening, so it is still shocking to many today to hear that salvation isn't something that they can earn but is a gift given to them. It's shocking to hear about a God who gave his life to rescue them from sin and then rose from the dead. Many people make up whatever they want to believe about God and call it faith. So many today stand arrogant as if they have all the right answers yet have missed the one God who can bring them salvation. This is just as much idolatry which leads to eternal death as the Athenians worshipping their false gods.

Yet as we listen to Paul reveal the true God to the Athenians, we aren't learning anything new. What a blessing this is! We aren't ignorant of the truth. We don't worship an unknown God. We worship a God who has graciously revealed himself to us—not just in creation and in the world around us. Through the Bible he has revealed to us just exactly who he is. You and I have a leg up on some of the smartest people of the world. We have been made privy to information some of the smartest people in the world haven't been able to know—the God of salvation and what he has done to save us. Recognize what a blessing it is that God has chosen to reveal himself to you. He has revealed himself as the God of love who did not want to see his people perish but have eternal life. He revealed his plan of salvation in sacrificing Jesus' perfect life on Calvary's cross and rising from the dead to conquer death. So often we are tempted to join in the progressive society around us and search for the latest and greatest spiritual idea out there. We forget that we already have all that we need in Jesus. We already know all that we need to know for life and salvation. We have a leg up on some of the smartest people in the world in knowing the God who created us, loves us, saved us and will take us to live with him one day in heaven.

Our love for this known God is what leads us to live a life of obedience to worship and glorify him. There's an interesting story about the soldiers who guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In 2003, Hurricane Isabelle was bearing down on the D.C. area. The government shut down for 2 days as everyone hunkered in and braced for the storm. The soldiers guarding the tomb were relieved from their post and instructed to take cover. They refused to do so. They felt it such an honor to guard this tomb that despite the tropical force rains and winds that pelted them, they continued their guard. If these soldiers were willing to do this for someone who is unknown to them and no longer able to help them, how much more are we willing serve our God whom we do know, who has done so much for us and will continue to do so? The Greeks worshipped their gods by putting up temples. We worship our God by the lives of obedience we live for him. We confess him both with our lips and with the lives that we live. He doesn't need our time to further his kingdom. He doesn't need our money to keep our church and school afloat. He doesn't need our mouths to praise him or tell others about him. He doesn't need anything that we humans can offer.

But it pleases him when we do. It worships him by showing with our actions the place he has in our lives. Our mission is to make Christ known throughout the world. Our use of time, talents and treasures to serve God and others gives God glory and makes him known to those around us. We have people all around us who are ignorant about the true God and will be lost eternally unless he is revealed to them. God has given us the gracious privilege like the Apostle Paul to make known to them who God is and what great things he has done for them. God determined the appointed times of our lives and placed us where we live in our world so that we can serve him by making him known to others. Some might sneer, some might want to hear more, and some might reject us outright. But...some might believe. We might not be able to change the world. But our testimony about Christ might change the world for someone. Who knows but that God put you in that person's life for such a time as this—to make him known to them that they might see him has the God who loves them and have the hope of eternal life that only he can give.

What a blessing that God has revealed himself and made himself known to us. We stand here today and confess our faith in him and are confident in the eternity that he has waiting for us. What a privilege that this same God counts us worthy to serve him and be his spokespeople to the world! Be about the work that God has given you, as you Make Him Known to the World. Amen.