

The 6th Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland Wa.
Acts 17: 22-31 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Today's reading from Acts is actually quite unusual! You all know that Paul's called "The Apostle to the Gentiles," but the author of Acts – Luke – only gives us two examples of times when Paul actually preached to the Gentiles! Today is one of those times.

And it's in Athens! If ever you wanted a symbol for a culture dedicated to seeking newness – or perhaps, better put, seeking "the next new thing" – Athens would be that place and that community.

Based on what Luke says elsewhere about Paul's preaching (that it was often long-winded!) I suspect we only have an outline of what he actually said – a sort of "cliff notes" version of a longer sermon. Even then, what Luke records is the fullest and most dramatic speech of Paul's missionary career, so its something that demands our attention.

Paul's approach was part direct honesty, part flattery, because he clearly wanted to establish some common ground with them, a place where they would be open to what he wanted to say. So he began by saying something like "you're known for your holy openness, for your recognition of the fundamental truth that, at its core, true religion always leaves a great deal unsaid because the language of faith is not easily found in the spoken or written the language of philosophy but in the mysterious language of the heart.

It's another way of Paul saying to those in Athens (who may have had quite different understandings of the Divine than he did) "we're all in the same boat, because we all start from this "thin place" of mystery.

Based on what Luke says, it's quite clear that Paul succeeded in establishing that connection with the Athenians; or, at the least, he got their attention – they were listening.

So Paul moves on to say something like this: "I'm here to tell you that the dim shadow we all perceive, the sacred mystery of the Divine, has been made concrete, made real, made present; that there's now flesh on these sacred bones. For God is "indeed...not far from each one of us." We are, in other words, always living in those thin places of potential encounter.

For all of the Athenians' love of "the next new thing," what Paul says to them is this: the true identity of the "unknown God" is anything but new; this "unknown God" is, in fact, the Creator God who stands at the center of the old Jewish dispensation, and is known in the new Christian Dispensation in Jesus.

All in all it's a fascinating sermon! One of the most notable things, I think, is the artful way Paul proclaims very common Judeo-Christian themes without quoting scripture at all! Some Christians criticize this sermon for exactly that reason; as I look at it, though, it's a surprisingly 21st Century way of talking about faith, for several reasons.

For example, first-century Athens has some significant parallels to twenty-first century America. Our Areopagus has multiple locations, from the halls of government to the institutions of education to the smart-phones so many of us hold in the palms of our hands.

And the Athenian search for the “next new thing” certainly sounds a great deal like our contemporary search for novelty.

And the idea of that ancient altar dedication – “To an Unknown God” – sounds a lot like trying to cover all the bases, a sort of contemporary “just in case” approach where religion functions a lot like fire insurance!

Of course, our personal "unknown god" is frequently quite a bit more subtle – it can be a mindset manufactured within us by a variety of sources that are intentionally so subtle that we can't identify them, as if we are simply puppets, and someone else is pulling on the strings. If you ask many people “who are you, really?” they frequently have trouble actually coming up with an answer.

And there are plenty of people out there who are more than happy to hand us that “unknown god” and invite our worship, without regard to any ethical principles, or any concern for the common good. Whether its trying to sell you bath soap, or a new car, or a freshly-minted politician, the ethical principles that underpin so many religions get either relegated to secondary importance, or ignored completely. Selling a product or winning a vote, is central, and each is hyped as the only “god” worth worshiping.

What can we learn from Paul's approach to the Athenians? He chose to go to the central place in Athens where it was possible to engage in religious conversation and debate and offer a vision of the incarnate God, crucified, risen, returning: Jesus Christ.

Ours is Paul's mission to enter into this muddle and offer the God to a world that has such a deep, mostly unfelt, need for a true and real encounter with God. And as with Paul, some will jeer, some will want to hear more.

Lastly, Paul would be the first to remind us that making such a proclamation does not have to be a literal repetition of his actions in Athens. If he were alive today he would almost certainly quote St. Francis, and remind us that our mission of proclaiming the gospel is done best by example, and that words are a poor substitute for God-filled actions!