

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017

The Unknown God
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22-31

Our scripture reading from Acts refers to the place where Paul was standing as “Areopagus”. It is the only place in scripture where that word is mentioned. What exactly is Areopagus?

It is two things. The first is a large rock in Athens close to the Acropolis. The name comes from two Greek words, “Areios” and “Pagos” which translates to “Ares Rock.” That sounds much like Ayers Rock in Australia and is as important to Greeks as Ayers Rock is to Australians. The name literally means “big piece of rock” and big it is.

The name also applies to a council of elders in Athens in pre-classical times. The council was similar to the Roman Senate and consisted of persons who had held high public office. The council would effectively be the Athens City Council and, in fact, that is how it is referred to in the Good News Bible translation. Paul presumably was speaking to the council, possibly at the site of the rock of the same name.

Paul’s audience was Greeks who would have little or no knowledge of Jewish laws and customs. Paul generally spoke in synagogues and relied on his Jewish background to speak to people. He didn’t have that advantage here and had to find a different way to communicate to the Athenians in words that they would understand.

Athens may well have been the most pagan city in the Roman Empire. It certainly had more idols than anywhere else in Greece. The Athenians had a god for everything -- for marriage, for the sea, for peace, for war, for love, and on and on. One website that I looked at listed 20 major gods --- Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, Aphrodite, and many others you are familiar with.

They had a great many other gods and if they encountered something for which there was no god, they created one.

They wanted to be sure that they acknowledged every god and, just in case they had overlooked one, they even had an idol of an unknown god. It wouldn’t have been wise to overlook a god and make that god angry.

Now, to talk to the Athenians about our God, Paul had to sift his way through this

Grecian plethora of gods. To do so he couldn't use Israel's and Jewish history to talk about Christ, he had to find common ground and to do that, he talked about the unknown Athenian god. He started by telling the Athenians that he sees that they are extremely religious as evidenced by their many idols including one to an unknown god.

The unknown god gives Paul the opening he needed to talk about God and Christ. He explains that the unknown god is really the God who created everything, the Lord of heaven and earth. God is not an idol made by human hands. God does not live in a shrine, he is everywhere.

Paul explains that God created humans from one common ancestor and provides everything that humans need. God is not made by human hands as were the other gods the Athenians worshiped. Rather God is the maker.

God made humans in such a way that humans long for God and Athenians need not be concerned about making sure that they have a god for everything. The one unknown God is the only god that the Athenians should worship.

In today's world if we are not careful with our priorities we can have as many gods, many idols, as the Athenians did. Our gods are those things that dominate our lives. Things like money, politics, our cars, our families, our home, electronics like smart phones, and on and on. Just as Paul told the Athenians, we need to focus our minds on the one true God and not relegate God to the status of an unknown god in a long list of material and personal things.

Paul is making the point to the Athenians that despite all of the many gods that they may worship, they do not know the one true God. The God that created all things; the God who does not live in a temple constructed by humans; the God who is God of everyone and all nations.

Paul declares that a new moment in time has come to pass. Everyone everywhere must repent, that is they must change their way of thinking, because God has appointed a judge, Jesus the Christ. The Day of Judgement is at hand, Paul says. God has raised from the dead the very man who is to be the judge.

The reaction from the Athenians was laughter. They were too sophisticated to accept the idea of resurrection. Athenians believed that the soul was immortal but could not accept the concept of resurrection.

Paul did get a small group to become believers but not a great many. He

probably greatly regretted the way that he preached to the Athenians and therefore later in other cities he preached exclusively about Jesus Christ, the crucifixion, and the resurrection.

Paul's audience in Athens was totally pagan and he was probably lucky to gain any converts. Paul was far less successful in Athens than anywhere else.

There is a lesson for us in this when we try to talk to others about Christ. As I said, people today can well be worshipping false gods, the big one being money. When wealth of anything else controls a person's life, the person becomes like the Athenians.

It has been said that every person depends on something else to define who they are. Inside of the human there are many things which can be worshipped.

Many young people today are pulling away from religion. Their new god is the Internet. With the click of a mouse button or a tap on the screen of a smart phone they can find all the answers for any question they might have, at least they think so.

We need to understand what someone's false god is --- money, a smart phone, or whatever and redirect them back to the true God and away from these and other false gods.

Talk to people, try to understand what their false gods are, and do your best to guide them into focusing on the true God.

Amen.

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017

The Unknown God
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22-31

Liturgical color - white

**This is the day the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Announcements

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

Many: And also with you.

Call to Worship (Responsive)

Bless the Lord, O people, sing!

Let the sound of praise ring out.

Come and hear what the Lord has done,

the Lord who has made everything!

*Opening Hymn "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" #263

Opening Prayer

Loving God,
in whom we live and move and have our being,
help us to choose life in you,
that we may keep the commands of Jesus,
follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit,
and witness to the hope that is within us,
sharing Christ's love in the world. **Amen.**

Prayer Response Inside front cover of hymnal – In Unison

Hear Our Prayer, O Lord, Hear Our Prayer, O Lord, Incline Thine ear to us, And grant us Thy peace. Amen.

Psalm of Praise Psalm 66:8-20. Pew Bible pages 900-901.

Please read the odd numbered verses responsively

⁸ Praise our God, all peoples,

let the sound of his praise be heard;

⁹ **he has preserved our lives**

and kept our feet from slipping.

¹⁰ For you, God, tested us;

you refined us like silver.

¹¹ **You brought us into prison**

and laid burdens on our backs.

¹² You let people ride over our heads;

we went through fire and water,

but you brought us to a place of abundance.

¹³ **I will come to your temple with burnt offerings**

and fulfill my vows to you—

¹⁴ vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke

when I was in trouble.

¹⁵ **I will sacrifice fat animals to you**

and an offering of rams;

I will offer bulls and goats.

¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God;

let me tell you what he has done for me.

¹⁷ **I cried out to him with my mouth;**

his praise was on my tongue.

¹⁸ If I had cherished sin in my heart,

the Lord would not have listened;

¹⁹ **but God has surely listened**

and has heard my prayer.

²⁰ Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me!

Call to Confession

Brother and sisters,
God not only asks us to repent,
but also assures us of forgiveness.
Therefore, let us confess our sins
to the one who is steadfast love.

Prayer of Confession (Unison)

**Loving God,
we do not always keep your commandments;
we fail to love you;
our conscience is not clear.
Wash us in the water of life
that we may live again
through the grace and mercy of Jesus,
our resurrected Savior. Amen.**

Assurance of God's Pardon

Sisters and brothers,
God forgives, restores, and strengthens us
through the risen Christ.
Know that you are forgiven
and be at peace.

*Gloria Patri #579– In Unison

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen

Prayer for Illumination

Come Holy Spirit, our helper and advocate:
Open our hearts and minds this day,
entice us with your presence.
Spark us with a word of life—
a message that we may share with others
as we seek to live Christ's love in the world.
All this we ask in the name of God,
who creates, redeems, and sustains us. **Amen.**

New Testament Lesson Acts 17:22-31, Pew Bible, pages 1722-1723

²² 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. ²³ For 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.

²⁴ "The 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. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From 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. ²⁷ God 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.'

²⁹ "Therefore 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. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For 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."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

*Congregational Hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” #260

Sermon **“The Unknown God”** Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

Anthem "He Hideth My Soul", Wintley Phipps (© 2013 Discovery House Music, Used by Permission. CCLI License 11224027) (CD 22, Tr. 3)

**Affirmation of Faith Apostles' Creed, ecumenical version. (Unison)*

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. AMEN.**

Tithes and Offerings

God, the divine giver,
gifts us with life and breath and all that is.
In gratitude, let us offer our gifts in return
for the goodness and grace of God in Christ.

**Doxology #592 – In Unison*

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host: Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer (responsive)

When the words "Lord in your mercy" are said, please respond "**receive our prayer.**"

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us give thanks to God who listens
and gives heed to our prayers.

**We praise and we bless you, our true
and loving God.**

We pray for all who search for you:
may they find their way in you.

Bless us with lips that sing your praise
and lives that tell the stories of all that you have done for us.

Open our eyes to find you among us
as we share your love with others.

Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for all who are oppressed by governments
or institutions:

for those whose voices are not heard or believed,
those with no one on their side.

Bless us with a joy for justice
and the strength to persevere as we work toward
your coming realm.

Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for all who hunger,
and those who worry each day how they will care for their families.

Bless us all with meaningful work and fill us with good things,
as we love and care for each other and find our sustenance in you.

Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for all who suffer the violence and scars of war,
for all soldiers and their families,

and all who live and serve in war-torn places.
Give them courage in the face of fear;
in times of trouble, do not let their feet slip.
Bless us with your vision of peace,
for you have made us one family by giving life and breath to all.
Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**
We remember before you all who have died,
and pray for all who will die today,
that they may know your peace.
Bless us with the gift of faith,
that we may know you and love you,
and enjoy life eternal shared with you,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**
Let us pray as Jesus taught us, **Our Father... Amen.**

*Closing Hymn "Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart" #145

*Charge and Blessing

Sisters and brothers in Christ,
God has heard you and given heed
to your prayers.
Therefore, go in peace to serve Christ,
and always be eager to do what is good.

May God, who creates, redeems, and sustains,
keep you steadfast in faith, buoyant in hope, and abounding in love.
And the blessing of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.