

## ***To An Unknown God***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
July 31, 2016  
Text: Acts 17:16-34

Paul was a gutsy guy. He had to be to travel as much as he did in a time when traveling from town to town was difficult and dangerous, practically impossible for the average person. But, then again, Paul was definitely NOT your average person, in his own time or in ours. We talked about Paul and his ceaseless traveling last week. He was constantly on the road talking about Jesus to anyone and everyone who would listen to him. When he could, he tried to begin his ministry in a new town with a group he thought might be at least a little welcoming, usually the local Jewish synagogue. But they were never his only audience, and sometimes there weren't that many Jews to speak to anyway.

Such was the case in today's story when Paul arrives in Athens. It's important for us to realize just how momentous Paul's trip to Athens was. Athens was a major metropolis of the ancient world, widely recognized as the seat of learning and the birthplace of the philosophies which formed the bedrock of society of Rome and before it, Greece. Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism all had adherents in Athens, and they met regularly to talk and discuss and debate ideas. These were intelligent people used to intelligent conversation. They were of the upper

class which was why they had the freedom to sit around debating ideas all day. They didn't have to labor with their hands and bodies to keep body and soul together. So when Paul shows up in their midst one day, the stage was set for an incredible exchange of ideas with some of the greatest minds of his day.

Paul arrived in Athens having been dropped off there by some friends trying to get him out of harm's way in Thessalonica and Beroea where he had been proclaiming the Good News of Jews, throwing the local Jewish leaders into an uproar in the process. Paul's friends literally spirit him off to Athens and leave him there with instructions to wait until Timothy and Silas can join him so they can continue on together. I always imagine that some muttered suggestions to keep quiet and stay out of trouble were also part of the final words given to Paul by these people trying to keep him alive.

But, Paul, being Paul, is not going to just hang around waiting for someone to join him before he goes on with his task of preaching and teaching about Jesus. He makes his way through the city doing a little sight-seeing as he does, and what he sees makes him very upset. Idols and images of the Roman and Greek pantheon of gods are everywhere! He even sees one statue identified as being dedicated to "an unknown god." That does it! Paul starts arguing with all the Athenians he could find – the local Jews in their synagogue, the people in the marketplace – people

who were devout and people who had no religious faith at all. If Paul could strike up a conversation, he did and it would soon turn into a debate, especially when he encountered someone from one of the local philosophical schools of Athens. He annoyed some of them – they called him a blabberer. But others were intrigued by him so they invited him to the Aeropagus for more discussion because the philosophers of Athens loved to debate. As the text says, they were also very curious about new ideas and were at least intrigued by what Paul was saying.

So, Paul finds himself at the Aeropagus which was basically a jumble of big rocks not too far from the Acropolis where the philosophers would gather each day for conversation and debate. He talked with them, explaining that he could see that some of them were religious, given the numbers of statues devoted to gods and goddesses he had seen in the city. But he didn't mean that as a compliment. He thought that statue to an unknown god was the last straw because to him it seemed more like just covering your bases rather than a sincere desire to connect with the divine. That's when he proceeded to tell them what he believed and why he believed it. They listened as he talked, some no doubt shaking their heads. When he finished, some sneered at him for his foolishness. Others said they were intrigued and perhaps would be willing to talk with him more at another time. And, the text says, a few believed.

To me, this is really remarkable given the audience he was speaking with. These were incredibly well educated people steeped in the philosophies of Platonism, Stoicism and Epicureanism. The ideas they debated each day, that formed the foundation of their lives were incredibly complex, so much so that studying these philosophies today is still challenging. Platonism, for example, held that what you can see and touch isn't really real but only a shadow of reality. For Platonists, the only thing that was truly real were ideas. For the Stoicists, how a person behaved mattered more than what a person said. That was because they believed that destructive emotions resulted from the failure to maintain one's will in accordance with the rules of nature. So, for them, the development of self-control over one's emotions was key to overcoming the hazardous results of destructive emotions. For the Epicurean philosophers, they believed that the greatest good in life was to attain pleasure but to do this one had to live a modest, simple life in which one pursued knowledge of the workings of the world while limiting one's desires as much as possible. If one was successful in doing this, you would enter a state of tranquility which meant freedom from fear and pain.

These are well formed, well thought out ideas and ways of interacting with the world which, by the time Paul was standing in front of them, had been in solidly in place for hundreds of years. And yet, still, they invited Paul to speak with them about his new

ideas which he did. Given his audience, I think it's amazing any of them were touched enough by what he was saying to be included among the faithful followers of Jesus in Athens. And that's what happened.

So, what does Paul's encounter with the learned Athenians mean to us? A couple of things I think. First, it's a clear invitation for each of us to consider what are the "unknown gods" of our own lives that might get in the way of our response to God. What comes between us and what God might be asking us, needing us to do? What excuses do we give to ourselves and to God and what unknown gods – those things that we allow to get in the way – are lurking in those excuses? These can be anything from "not enough time" to "not enough money" to "too much stress" to a simple fear failure. What keeps us from believing in ourselves and what we can do? All these barriers between us and God's plan for us are the unknown gods we allow to creep into our lives, pushing God's desires off to the side. Paul didn't allow anything to keep him from doing what he believed God was asking him to do. It wouldn't have occurred to him to be intimidated by the great thinkers of the Aeropagus! He was doing what God needed him to do and God would give him whatever he needed to do it. And knowing that was enough for Paul.

Important as this lesson is for us, though, there is yet another insight especially relevant to our church, and all churches

who want to be about God's work in the world. Paul teaches us a very important lesson in this story about his debating the greatest minds of Athens about the role of God and faith in one's life. And it's really very simple. So simple, in fact, that we overlook it all the time. Here it is – Paul went to them. He didn't stay with the people he was comfortable with. He didn't stay in the situation he was comfortable with. He went out to the people – where they were – and he talked to them in their own space, on their own turf. And how is this relevant to us in our church? Well, if Paul was here he'd say one thing to us – get out of this building and out to where the people are! Talk to them where you encounter them. Don't wait for them to walk into the church!

And what does this mean for us? Well, it means doing new things in new ways for one. Like the pollinator garden which is intended as a gift to the community and a resource for the community even as it is our tangible testimony to our commitment to care for God's Creation. Like the new Harvest Table dinner ministry which will be starting here in September. This entirely new approach to worship is designed to incorporate a whole bunch of new thinking about everything from farm to table cooking to worshiping in small groups on a weekday night with the whole group participating in preparation, leading and cleaning up as an act of worship for all ages. It will be a new way of including people in worship who might not join us otherwise.

