

Altars to an Unknown God

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Acts 17:22-31

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17:22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

17:23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

17:24 The God who made the world and everything in it, the one who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,

17:25 nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God is the one who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

17:26 From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,

17:27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God--though indeed God is not far from each one of us.

17:28 For 'In God we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are God's offspring.'

17:29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

17:30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now God commands all people everywhere to repent,

17:31 because God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged in righteousness by a human whom God has appointed, and of this God has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

I.

In ancient times, the Greek city of Athens was rich in temples to a variety of gods. Have any of you here ever been to the Acropolis? I understand that by the time of the Romans, Athens was already a bit beyond its prime... but the temples, if a bit worn, still stood. Among them was one that was a bit different. It functioned as a placeholder for any deities the Athenians may have missed—a temple to an Unknown God.

Now, Athens had a rich history intellectually. The city that had killed Socrates claimed his heritage, took pride in a well-read citizenry. So we may well wonder if among the more conventional shrines, it claimed this temple as a quiet altar to the philosopher's God, the Being beyond the gods and mortals, the Form of the Good, the unmoved mover, the cause and end of all things. Or was it the Athenians just being hospitable, and kind of cosmopolitan? Were they acknowledging that there were gods they had never met, foreign gods... and being pluralistic and open-minded, offering a space for anyone who wished to worship their own god!

The altar to an unknown god caught the attention of one Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, when he made it to the famous city of Athens, and had a look around. This unknown unnamed god offered a legitimate point of entry into conversation with the Athenians. And so one day, after being a tourist, Paul stood in front of a famous courthouse, the Areopagus, not far from this altar, and made like an Athenian— He made a philosophical speech, acknowledging the Athenian love of wisdom and longing for intellectual inquiry. *“Athenians,”* he began. And he wryly spoke of how very very religious they were—perhaps sounding a little sarcastic, since he was speaking among those who *had* many gods, but often took it all pretty lightly! But then Paul turned the tables, rhetorically speaking, explaining why he really did believe they were religious. *“For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, the one who is the sovereign of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God is the one who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”*

Acknowledging the ancient Greek heritage of searching and reaching and feeling for Truth through the use of reason, summoning up that universal human desire to reach out for the universe, Paul spoke of the God whom he loved as the creator of all things. He spoke of one who made human beings so that they would *“search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God--though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For ‘In God we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are God’s offspring.’”*

II.

You and I live in a time when like Athens of old, religious institutions are crumbling a bit around the edges. Does the phrase “None zone” mean anything to you? It refers to the surveys done in cities around the country but especially on the east and west coast, cities including this one. And it turns out that in many parts of the country an increasing number of people, when asked their religious affiliation, all check the same box. The one labeled “None”.

I come to you most recently from a part of the US where churches are still pretty popular. Someone has referred to North Carolina’s religious institutions as “Churches on steroids.” It isn’t just the Southern Baptists and the Methodists and the Pentecostals. Catholic Churches, the Unitarians, some UCC churches—they’re big. When we have protests at the State House in North Carolina, they are prayer meetings. My arrest last year at the North Carolina Legislature, along with a thousand or so others concerned about voting rights and education and the rights of LGBT people under siege—well like everyone else I was charged in part for the crime of singing and praying too loudly. Liberals, like conservatives in North Carolina, pray and sing hymns.

My point here isn’t about politics—it is that religion and religiousness are more cool in some parts of the country than others. And it is a different thing to try to come together in a faith community, give witness to and worship a living God, when it isn’t any longer the normal conventional path that everyone follows. We need, like the Apostle Paul in Athens, to come up with fresh strategies for making sense to those whose longing for truth is deep but whose religion is uncertain. We need to become comprehensible, for those who do not know the culture of

Christendom, or have not been to Sunday School, or don't know the same songs we've been singing since God made dirt.

We live in a time and place when the altar to an unknown god is the best hope we have, for starting a conversation with a culture that seemingly has lost interest, or certainly has quit trusting and relying on, religion in its traditional forms. Some are feeling hopeless about this task of starting afresh! I don't feel that way at all.

In the church I just left, there is a woman who is the mother of two young children, who had started attending the church with her husband. Now despite our Carolinian love of church, somehow her background was ...none zone. But she had a deep longing for faith, a hunger for reading the bible, not as a cookbook or a rulebook, but as a source of stories, and a way of wisdom.

We had begun there an early Sunday worship service that was focused on being intergenerational and informal—and well, let's call her Molly—Molly was one of the dozen or so people who always came to THAT worship. The coolest thing was that when we were doing our reflections on the scripture for the day, Molly was the one who would stop us right in the middle with some very basic question. She was very bright, very spiritual, and had zero background.

It was one Palm Sunday that Molly finally got through to me the terribleness of my operating assumptions that my listeners already knew the story—even the story of Easter. As we were talking about the night before Good Friday, she stopped me. “Wait a second” she said—I was talking about Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal, the night before Jesus was crucified--executed. “Wait a second. Did they *all* leave him? Every one of his friends?” I took a deep breath. “Um, yes.” She looked shocked. “How about the next day—nobody stayed with him?” I started to say, “Nobody...” and then I had to stop too. “There were no men,” I said. “But his mother and a few of the women stayed there.” Molly looked relieved. I went on. “Early Sunday, it was the women who came to the tomb...” She grinned. “YESS.” She said, pumping her arm. “It's the women who come through. Every time!” She had never heard it before—and she helped me hear it, for the very first time.

III.

Friends in Emmanuel-Friedens church, we have been given a sacred charge. We are children of a faith that does not find its meaning ultimately on altars of stone or wood or even houses of brick and stain-glass. We have our traditions, but we do not believe that tradition can save or liberate us. Rather there is a living Spirit, in whom we live and move and have our being. We are convinced that every human being is a child of the God who made every creature, male and female and other, African and European, native and Latino and Asian, in God's own image. We believe Christ came to us to show us an amazing Way of love for one another, for our neighbors, even for our enemies. We bear witness to a Love more powerful than death. And so this is our time. We are the ones to enter into conversation with the children of an unknown God.

I am not concerned about whether we live in Athens or in Rome, in the none zone or the belly of the beast. Because Molly has reminded me that there was a day when Christ's community of faith got down to about three people—three women. Oh and maybe a couple of men watching from afar. Yet the faith of that handful, and the power of the maker of heaven and earth and all that dwells therein, turned abandonment and doubt and fear into return, and into courage, into faith and into love. So I am not concerned about numbers.

What is cause for concern—and I am speaking broadly here of mainline churches, I don't know if the generalization fits in this community—what is cause for concern is that we who are the inheritors of this lively faith may be in danger of giving up, getting depressed, going home, or the same thing, turning deeply inward and letting the world go by. We cannot do that! What we have to share is too good, too lovely, too powerful, to keep it to ourselves. Because when we turn inward, we fail to notice the folk who are grasping for God, feeling for Truth, longing for Love. Or we don't recognize how hard it is to enter a community where everyone already knows the story—when you have never heard it before.

17 years ago, a woman named Dorothy Roat came out of church one day, in our struggling city neighborhood in Rochester, New York. We had just made a difficult decision as a church. We had chosen ministry in our neighborhood over caution, despite the fact that we weren't really sure we could afford it. Dorothy pumped my hand as she came out after the meeting. "Peter" she said seriously, "I am still convinced this church is going to go down." Then she gave me one of her sweetest toughest Yankee smiles. "But by God we are going down doing ministry." Dorothy was having trouble walking that day, she needed a knee replaced I think. But as she walked away, she had a little skip in her step, despite the limp.

Emmanuel Friedens Church, you and I are surrounded by those who long for something holy. We are surrounded by need, but we are also surrounded by gifted people who actually want something that we have in our possession. May the love of God, the liberating message of Jesus of Nazareth and the power of a living Spirit guide us and bless us in the conversation. And may we skip a bit, even though we limp! Amen.