

**“Unknown God”**  
**Sermon on Sunday, May 17, 2020**  
Based on Acts 17: 22-28

Dear congregation, dear people listening to this service wherever you are!

What do Americans believe? The Pew Research Center carries out in-depth studies about matters of faith every ten years or so. They track shifts in beliefs and attitudes toward religion. While there have been significant changes over the years, one aspect of belief has remained amazingly constant. Ninety percent of people in the US believe in a higher power, not necessarily a God as described in the Bible, but some higher power that we owe our existence to. Nine out of ten Americans are at least open minded about religion.

Now let us revisit the first reading that we heard from Acts 17, Paul speaking to people in the ancient city of Athens, the hometown of Socrates and Plato, the birthplace of the first democracy, the earliest center of Western philosophy. Many beliefs swirled around in that city; temples offered services and sacrifices to a variety of gods; dozens of religions were practiced. People in Athens tended to be at the same time skeptical and open-minded about religion. And if we look around in our own communities and listen to people on those rare occasions when the subject of religion is brought up, we will find the same attitude: open-mindedness and skepticism. “I’m not sure about this God thing and especially about church and organized religion,” someone might say. “But do I believe in a higher power? Yes!”

I have always felt that it’s not very smart to lecture people about God, as if I had all the answers and could eloquently and intimately speak about a reality that is, despite my call as a pastor, still beyond me, just as it was beyond Abraham and Moses and all the others. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth expressed what I mean in this pointed quote. “As pastors,” he once wrote, “we are charged to speak about God. But we are inadequately equipped to do so. Whenever we speak, we bring both this sense of call and our inadequacy to the table.” So, personally I am as curious and sometimes as skeptical as those 90% who believe in a higher power. I believe in Jesus, yes. I believe in the Holy Spirit, yes. I feel the presence of God in my life, yes. But I also know that I can’t capture, conserve or adequately put words to that presence. It is beyond me.

Paul, after sharing the gospel of Jesus with the people in Athens and telling them that this unknown God had made an appearance in the form of a carpenter from Galilee, tells the people in Athens something that's important for us to hear again and again: God is not far from any one of us. You may feel that you are far away from God, because you are not particularly spiritual or religious; you may have your doubts; or you feel that you have messed up and don't belong. I have heard all of those things mentioned by people in so many words, but the truth is: God is not far from any one of us. And while we are practicing our faith away from our beloved church, take this... Paul says, God doesn't live in temples or church buildings. He's not far from any one of us, wherever you are!

Many years ago when I was a young pastor in Philadelphia, the streets were always teeming with children. One day, a group of kids came to me, pointed at the church and said, "Does God live there?" "Can we see him?" So, what was I going to tell those curious, excited children? I invited them in of course. We went into the church, into the sanctuary and they had more questions, and I tried to tell them that this was God's house. "Where is God?" one of the kids asked, and before I could answer, they noticed the large picture above the altar, depicting Jesus as the shepherd. "There he is!" Probably that was better than any answer I could have given them. We kneeled there and prayed, in front of Jesus. I think the kids felt this in that moment: he is not far away from any one of us!

At the end of the passage that we heard today, Paul says, "For in him we live and move and have our being." It is one of my favorite statements made by Paul. It places God and the God-presence squarely in our lives, wherever we are, whatever we go through, however strong or weak we think our faith is. Now, if we could only become a bit more aware and mindful of that God-presence that is in our lives. We would find peace. We would find strength. We would be filled with hope. And gratitude. And faith.

Be blessed and be safe.

Amen.