

To An Unknown God

[Acts 17:22-31]

"What then you worship as unknown, I proclaim you."

K Karpen, Sunday, May 1, 2005

[Acts 17: 22-31 "To An Unknown God," K Karpen, Sunday, May 1, 2005]

"From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth...so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God—though indeed God is not far from each of us."

On Tuesday afternoon I was invited along with a group of other clergy to sit down with all the deans at Barnard College and tell them about: religion. So we came, all the clergy who have a formal relationship with Columbia and Barnard; there were Baptists & Buddhists, Jains and Jews, Methodists & Muslims, Catholics, Unitarians, Episcopalians; you get the idea.

I think it was the first time a meeting like that has happened, at least in the last 20 years. Barnard is a staunchy, secular place, and of course academia in general over the past half-century has pretty much tried to ignore religion, thinking that if they did, religion would, perhaps, go away. Well, I think that's changing. And whether because of events on the Columbia/Barnard campus or the atmosphere in the country or the situation of the world, the deans were open and interested in whatever we had to say.

Paul finds himself in that sort of situation soon after his arrival in Athens. He has been wandering around, looking at everything and speaking about God and the Christian way, and he is asked to come before the Areopagus, a sort of city council/civic court, and explain what he's up to and why he thinks what he thinks & says what he says.

As Emily read for us a few minutes ago from 1 Peter, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." That is what Paul does. Hope is a scary thing, and people get troubled by it and get curious about it. So Paul speaks to them about his hope, and he does it "with gentleness and respect."

This is only surprising if you know Paul: he can be a little blunt and tactless. With the Athenians, though, he is respectful and gentle. He shows he knows them. He shows he's listened to them. He shows he admires them. He quotes their philosophies; he speaks about their shrines & institutions.

A lot of the time we are reluctant to talk with other people about our faith. We're a little embarrassed by it, maybe. Or we're used to the people who share their faith being neither gentle nor respectful. Or we're just not quite sure enough about what we believe and what we don't to be able to give an accounting of the hope that is in us.

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But as someone once said to me, "Why wouldn't you want to share your faith with me? You've shared everything else about yourself; isn't your faith a big part of who you are? Why wouldn't you want to share that?"

Our problem in the liberal churches—one of our problems—is that we've given evangelism to the evangelicals. We've left evangelism to the evangelicals. Evangelism is the sharing of the 'evangel,' the 'Gospel,' the 'good news.' Sharing the good news of Jesus, about Jesus, and what that news means in my life—and why wouldn't I want to do that?

As long as I can follow scripture and do it with gentleness and respect. As long as I can couple it as Paul does with a genuine interest and knowledge and appreciation of the faith of other people. As long as I can do that!

Paul is sure of the things he's sure of—make no mistake about it! But he also knows that seeking God, or as Paul puts it, "groping for God" is the task of every human being. And Paul knows if we grope for God, God will find us. Why? Because "God is not far from each of us."

He does not say with the pantheists or the panentheists, that God is in us all—rather he tells the people of Athens what their sages have told them already: We are in God. In God, we live. In God, we move. In God, we have our being. And oddly enough, that sometimes makes it hard to see God, to find God, to know God.

The ancient rabbis had a question, "Who discovered water?" And their answer was, "Not the fish; they swim in it." Sometimes I think God is almost too close for us to know God. Because of this, our God remains like that God of the Athenians: an unknown God.

We swim in God's presence. We breathe God's spirit with every breath. We live in God, and yet I suspect we often live in an unknown God. Unknown to us. But, you know, an unknown God is not an unknowing God. An unknown God is never an unknowing God. As Paul says elsewhere in our scripture, our task and our desire is simply to know as we are known. That's why we come together like this. That's why we talk together and sing together and pray together and listen together; and share our faith with each other. To know, even as we are known. To grope together for God. To grapple with God.

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As Charles Wesley put it, "I need not tell thee who I am, my misery and sin declare; thyself hast called me by my name, look on thy hands and read it there. But who, I ask thee, who art thou?"

The details may not be so important. There are many ways of knowing, not all of which fill books. I'm speaking of knowing, in terms of relating, of being connected to, at some deep level beyond words. As Anne Lamott puts it, "I don't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just need to turn my life over to whoever came up with the Redwood trees."

And as Paul says, that one is "the God who made the world and everything in it...God is the one who gives to every person life and breath and all things." That's the one I want to know—the one who knows me. That's the one I care about—the one who cares about me! That's the one I want to love—the one who loves me desperately. That's the one I can't stop talking about.

The one an old preacher friend of mine would always describe as the one who woke me up this morning in the land of the living, rested, and in my right mind. That's the one I want to call to with Charles Wesley, crying "Speak to my heart, in blessing speak, be conquered by my instant prayer. Speak, or thou never hence shalt move, and tell me if thy name is Love."