

In a Nutshell
Acts 17:22-29
Rev. Emily Peck-McClain
April 27, 2008

Do you know God? Wow, that's a loaded question to start a sermon with, isn't it? I want to ask it anyway. Just to make you think. And make me think. This passage recounts Paul's address to the Athenians. He acknowledges their religiosity. I'm going to change it up a bit, just for fun...

New Yorkers, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. When I walk through the City, I see so many churches. Not as many churches as Starbucks or banks, but lots of churches. Right here on Broadway, walking down from 96th street, where I got off the subway, I saw lots of churches. A few on Broadway, a few on Amsterdam. But in just the 10 blocks getting here this morning, I saw so many churches! I have looked carefully at the objects of your worship. I see that in your pocket you carry pieces of paper which you exchange for goods and services that says, "In God we trust" on them. While listening to people talk, I hear you invoke the name of God all the time. "Oh my God," I hear, or "Good Lord." These phrases are so often uttered, that I understand that there's even a shorter way to say it as you type into your cell phone: OMG. I also saw a poster that says, "OMFG" but I'm not sure about that one... And when I came into this church this morning, I see how many of you feel happy to be here. How you see friends you haven't seen in a week; how you smile during the children's message; how you sing so beautifully to God. And yet I wonder, if I were to ask you, or any other New Yorker in this city of religiosity, who God is, I wonder how many would say, "You know, I'm not

so sure.” Let me be clear on this, my friends, there is nothing wrong with feeling this way. But if you do not know whom you worship, let me tell you!

And here, Paul is concise. Paul obviously does know who God is. And Paul is one helpful evangelist. He spreads the word of God and his experience of Christ all over the first century world. He is set of fire by a transformative experience on the road to Damascus and given the charge from God to preach to those who are not Jewish. Spread the Gospel beyond the limits that the apostles started with. On fire for Christ. That’s what Paul is. So he knows who God is and rejoices in spreading that knowledge on. In this case, to the Athenians. So here goes: According to Paul, as written by Luke in Acts, this is God in a nutshell:

- 1) The creator of Heaven and earth and all the things on the earth
- 2) Doesn’t live on the earth in shrines you make
- 3) Doesn’t need anything, you don’t have to feed God because it’s God who gives life to everything that has life
- 4) God made all the people, who are all connected
- 5) God knows all the people and where they live
- 6) God can be found. If you start looking, you will find God because God is always close.
- 7) We are God’s offspring so we can’t make an image of God of our gold or silver or stone. God is qualitatively different than anything our imaginations can come up with.

So there you go, 7 important points about God. Do you know God now? Not surprisingly, I want to take each of those points just for a little bit. So let's start with the first one. God made heaven and earth and everything on the earth. We talked a lot about this last week because we celebrated Earth Day in worship. Sometimes it's hard to think of how amazing our Creator God is when we're surrounded by some much that human hands have made. But picture a place where you can see, taste, & feels creation by God. Even if it's a 5 foot space in Central Park where you can take your shoes off and feel the grass, think about it. God made it. Every bit of it. The worms and bugs, the soil, the systems that link it all together, the water that refreshes us and the ground, the seasons that show the green bravely coming back to the brown tree branches. Every bit of it. What imagination that must take! Every leaf design, every flower petal, every seed, every animal. I can hardly express how awesome that makes our Creator!

Number 2: God doesn't live on the earth in shrines you make. Not that our churches aren't pretty, but God is not confined to it. We can't hold or limit or possess this magnificent God. God visited earth in the form of a man in the first century named Jesus but the world couldn't not contain him either. God moves around us in the Spirit that inspires us and the conscience that aids us and advocates for us. But the Spirit cannot be made to stop moving. And we can't make the Spirit rest on those we want or in places we want. The Spirit moves as it wills, with the perfect will of the One who created all that is.

Number 3: Doesn't need anything, you don't have to feed God because it's God who gives life to everything that has life. This one is a little hard, a little humbling. All the praise we give to God – God doesn't need it. All the work we do and the marches we march and the letters we write and the prayers we pray – God doesn't need it. Even if we

gave God all that we have, it's not enough because God gave us all that we have in the first place. This actually comes from St. Anselm's theory of why we can't atone for our own sins. Everything we have comes from God. We can't give God anything God doesn't already have (or can't create). God doesn't need us. Ouch. But here's the thing, we need God. And other people need us. And we need other people. When we do God's work, it isn't for God's benefit – it is for the benefit of humanity, the humanity which God made and loves.

Which brings us to number 4: God made all the people, who are all connected. This was the plan all along, we are all connected. All humanity is tied together since its creation. We are not separate or unconcerned with what happens across the world, because we are connected to all people everywhere. We are connected to those who are oppressed and to those who do the oppressing. We are connected to those who are targets of violence and those who cause the harm. In some ways, this globalized and globalizing world helps us to know this. When something happens anywhere in the world, if we choose to read the papers and hear the reports, we know about it. It happens to our brothers and sisters, sometimes at the hands of other of our brothers sisters.

Which brings us to number 5: God knows all the people and where they live. Wherever we are, wherever our brothers and sisters are, God knows them. Scripture tells us that God “allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.” God knows where your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren will live and when. God knows where your nieces and nephews and fourth cousins twice removed will live and when. God knows where your godchildren and godchildren's godchildren will live and when. This year at General Conference, the

Reconciling Ministries Network's theme is "One Family Tree". In yesterday's newsletter, which they write up each day of General Conference and pass out to all delegates, they wrote, "We're very pleased with the legislative committee officers elected. They represent the diversity found within our UM connection and will ensure fair and open conversation for holy conferencing. The church recognizes the strength of all the branches in our One Family Tree. Even when we have differences we can respect each other. We hold them all in prayer during this time of discernment." Isn't it incredible that God knows this family tree completely and fully? Not only those are living now, but those who came before until the beginning of people. And all those who will come after. God knows our One Family Tree from the first root to the last branch, which we can't even see or imagine yet.

Number 6: God can be found. If you start looking, you will find God because God is always close. We read that in God we live and move and have our being. In God we live. And move. And have our being. God isn't far because we are in God. There is such poetry in that and such simplicity that I'm just not going to say anything else. But just pray for a second, meditate on this: If you are searching for God, you will find God. Because it is in God that we live and move and have our being.

Number 7: We are God's offspring so we can't make an image of God of our gold or silver or stone. God is qualitatively different than anything our imaginations can come up with. Look around you at all the stuff that displays our religiosity. And let's be honest about the fact that Starbucks and our banks all show our religiosity to our economic system, too. A different kind of lower-case god, but still, to many people, a god. We can't create God or contain God, the real upper-case God, in anything we make. Our words

aren't enough. Our thoughts aren't enough. Things we make, all around us, things made by human hands from buildings to roads to churches to our children's lunches and our own dinners. Even creative things, our art, our voices raised in song, our notes on a page, a painting, a dance. Our imaginations, however wild they may roam, cannot make God. Our Heavenly Parent, our Glorious Creator, is beyond our wildest imagination.

To know God is to know all these things in Paul's nutshell. And in the end to know that God is not to be contained or knowable. So when asked, Do you know God? You can honestly reply, I know about God. I know I am known thoroughly by God. I know my place in this world and my call within it. In some ways, we have to be just like the Athenians and know that our altars and churches are all made to an unknown God. But at least we can and do know those 7 things about God from Paul. We know our church and our altar cannot contain God, and this is important in this world where we are all part of the same One Family Tree, isn't it? We know that nothing we make to represent God actually does. And when it comes down to it - no. I do not know the unknowable mysterious God. My words are not enough to speak all things about God. My imagination isn't wild enough to get it. I know I am known. I know I worship. But no, I cannot know God. In some ways, we have to be just like the Athenians and know that our altars and churches are all made to an unknown God. But at least we can and do know those 7 things about God from Paul. We know our church and our altar cannot contain God, and this is important in this world where we are all part of the same One Family Tree, isn't it? We know that nothing we make to represent God actually does.