



From the Pulpit: October 31, 2021

Reformation/All Hallows' Eve

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Acts 17:16–34

The (Re)Birth of the Church, VIII: Reasonable Faith

We've been looking at the Book of Acts to find out what God is calling the church to be. Especially after the disruption of 684 days of this retched pandemic. What are we going to be, what is different about the life of the church after all this disruption? Today I want to look with you one of the greatest stories of the New Testament. I find it difficult to even think of the New Testament without this story from Acts 17.

So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

"Paul tells the Athenians that it's better to be vague about God than wrong."

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. When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this."

The Book of Acts is the story of Paul's irrepressible journey from Jerusalem, the humble capital of a tiny and insignificant Roman province, the religious center of the world, to Rome, the world's political and military capital, and just at the midpoint of the journey, Paul ends up, almost by accident, in the world's intellectual capital, the ancient and venerable city of

Athens,¹ home to the likes of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus.

Athens was not on Paul's original itinerary. Athens was a detour. This was supposed to be a day off for Paul, and Luke almost makes it sound as if Paul decides to take himself on a little sightseeing pilgrimage and he begins wandering around the city as if he were a tourist with a Nikon camera and four telephoto lenses slung around his neck, Nikon because after all, it must be named after Nike, the Greek Goddess of Victory, to whom there surely must have been a temple erected in Athens.

¹ This analysis of the place of Acts 17 in the structure of Luke comes from James Barr in *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 31.

And during his sightseeing tour Paul is shocked to discover that he is confronted in Athens with a virtual phalanx of graven images and altars and temples erected to every major and minor god ever mentioned in the annals of poetry and religion. You can't move from here to there in Athens without tripping over a trivial deity of some kind or other.

But there is at least one good thing about this perpetual lust for novelty. The Athenians are very open-minded. They even want to hear what Paul has to say about God, so they take him to the Areopagus, a hill just northwest of the Acropolis, and if you've been there you know that Areopagus simply means "the hill of Ares," Ares, the Greek God of War, whose Roman name is Mars, and so we often speak of this incident from the Book of Acts as "Paul at Mars Hill."

And then Paul finds a point of connection with the very sophisticated Athenians. Among all the statues of Zeus and Eros and Psyche and Hermes and the temple to the goddess Athena, after whom the city is named, Paul finds a modest, nondescript little altar with this inscription: *Agnosto Theo*: "To an Unknown God," or "To the God We Do Not Know." It's where we get our English word "agnostic," of course, which means to be ignorant of, to profess or pretend not to know who God is or even whether there is such a being.

And here's Paul's point of connection. Paul tells the Athenians that it's better to be vague about God than wrong.

Better to be vague about God than wrong, like a ranting, raving, red-faced preacher. In 1925 Clarence Darrow defended John Scopes who was being tried for teaching the theory of evolution, and when the prosecution accused him of being an agnostic, he replied, "I do not consider it an insult but rather a compliment to be called an agnostic. I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure." Well that pretty much sums up Scopes' prosecutors and Darrow's accusers, doesn't it? Ignorant men.

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The great nineteenth-century American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out that the skeptic gives a great gift to the intellectual world. The skeptic, said Emerson, alerts us to the need for what he called "resistance to premature conclusions."² It's good to remember now and then that when it comes to the God whom even Moses was forbidden to look in the face, all conclusions are premature.

As Karl Barth so vividly put it, "God is not 'man' said in a loud voice."³ That's what God is in the Greek myths: man said in a loud voice. The agnostic doesn't know much, but at least she knows that looking in the mirror can't tell us a whole lot about who God is.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the essay "Montaigne, or the Skeptic," quoted by Robert D. Richardson, Jr., in *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 416.

³ Karl Barth, quoted by William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas in *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 25.

Agnosto Theo, says the inscription: “To an Unknown God.” This is not the **end** of Paul’s argument, but just the **beginning**. He goes on to say, “Athenians, what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 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 with human hands....Nor is God far from us, for in God we live and move and have our being, as even one of your own poets have said.”

So how is this story from Acts God’s word for us today, at this very moment, in this very place. Well, I’m glad you asked. In this fall sermon series we’ve been talking about The (Re)Birth of the Church. After this dreadful pandemic and all the other historical and cultural hazards that have thrashed the American Church in the last 40 years, what is God calling us to be and do, at this very moment and in this very place?

Well, one answer is “More of the same.” I have concluded that this is our moment. Kenilworth Union Church is exceptionally equipped to address the current moment in the cultural zeitgeist, because more and more Americans are becoming Athenians; that is to say, agnostic about what God is like or even if there **is** one.

Four years ago I preached a sermon here called *Why There Are More Nones Than Nuns*—I’m sure you remember that, right?—why are there more Nones—N-O-N-E-S—than Nuns—N-U-N-S? NONE is the biggest religion in the United States, slightly more than Catholics and slightly more than Evangelicals. Nones—N-O-N-E-S—outnumber Nuns—N-U-N-S—75 million to 50,000, or about 1,400 times. For the first time in memory, fewer than half of all Americans belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque.

This is obviously bad news for the Christian Church. It is a substantial threat to the institutional life of the American congregation. But it is also a vast opportunity for us, because our church is intentionally multi-denominational and intentionally non-doctrinaire. We welcome people of robust faith here, of scant faith, and even of no faith, so that all of us together can explore the unseen world that lies adjacent to the one we know, whatever that means for you. Eun Joo is going to give us just a little glimpse into that unseen world with her postlude.

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The only official creeds we have here are from the Christian Evangelist Matthew and the Hebrew prophet Micah. Matthew—love God above all and your neighbor as yourself. Micah: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.

Most people of good will can embrace one or both of those two creeds. Jews can embrace them—obviously since they both come from the Hebrew Scriptures. Muslims embrace those creeds; Buddhists, Hindus, and, for the most part, Nones. Those creeds are the **gateway** to a more defined, committed faith in the God we know through Jesus Christ.

Those creeds can make us juster, kinder, humbler, more neighborly. We all need a faith that makes us larger and more magnanimous, rather than smaller, constricted and pinched. A Christian school in Brooklyn, whose provenance I will not name to avoid casting aspersions, just fired a music teacher for marrying his long-time partner, now his husband.

It is illegal in the United States to fire someone because of his sexual orientation, unless you are a religious institution, and you define an employee as a minister. That music teacher didn’t think of himself as a minister, but the Church called him one and promptly fired him.

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Do you know someone whose faith makes them smaller, turns them into pinchpenny guardians of obsolete standards? It's one of the reasons NONES outnumber Presbyterians 75-1 and Methodists 11-1.

You're not sure? You worship at the altar of the Unknown God? Come and see. Come here and find out what life with God can be like.

And then, with Paul, we'll go on. We'll suggest that if God ever were to be glimpsed in some fleeting way, if ever there were a human face that looked anything at all like God, it would be the face of the One who was born at Bethlehem, grew up at Nazareth, died at Calvary, and came back to live again and rule the world. Because like Paul, we will not rest content with *Agnosto Theo*, the unknown God. That's a good place to start, but not a good place to quit.

When Paul said God can be known in Jesus of Nazareth, some of the Athenians scoffed, but others said, "We will hear you again about this." And when they did hear him again, perhaps some of them came to understand that God can be known, that God does have a face, and it's the face of that one we know so well, even if we've never really seen it.

Holy God, Lord of heaven and earth, creator of all that is, maker of the stars, by whose hand the Aurora Borealis is painted across the midnight sky,

We cannot help but feel the shortening of the days. We are tempted to ignore the alarm clamoring before dawn, then race the setting sun home from work and school, hoping to spend a few moments outdoors. In the waning light we are unsettled by pangs of sadness and winter dread.

We offer our prayers today for those impacted by the changing seasons: for people who lack adequate shelter in the winter months; for many who must stay home when the sidewalks are slick; for those who battle the depths of depression in the dark; and for all who need company, warmth, and light.

We know, indeed, that you are not far from us. And so, we offer our heartfelt petitions for those who are sick and recovering, for those who are struggling with loss, for those seeking reconciliation too long in coming.

And yet Holy One, the oak leaves still stubbornly hold on, shimmering in their season, a reminder that it was you who set the earth into a sure and tilting orbit around the sun and declared it "good."

On this Halloween, when we anticipate the knocking on our doors announcing the arrival of dinosaurs and superheroes, princesses and unicorns, vampires and ladybugs, we pray especially for children. Let the treats offered today be a sign of our renewed commitment to create with you, O God, a community, a country, and a world, where every child knows your love and has what they need to flourish.

On this All Hallows' Eve, the names of beloved saints are on the tips of our tongues. We are grateful for the generations of the faithful who searched for you tirelessly, served boldly, gave generously, and taught us by example how to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. We give you thanks for their lives and, in our mourning, find comfort in the promise of eternal life, through Jesus Christ who teaches us to pray: Our Father...