

Getting to Know the Unknown God

Lessons: Acts 17:22-28, John 14:15-21

I had a wonderful teacher for Greek in college. He made the language so real and rich that I took enough courses to minor in it. Greek is complex and subtle, never clear or obvious. There are shades of meaning in most words, and their usage in the context shapes their meaning, too. He was also a minister, and said that the “Greek” language and its civilization were part of what Paul meant when he wrote about “at the right time, God sent his Son, born of a woman.”

Greeks are known for the birth of science, history, philosophy, democracy - new ideas. Greeks already had religions - lots of them - because their culture was flexible and prayed to a particular god to suit the situation. In the pantheon of all the gods to cover so many human drives, they had an empty pedestal waiting for the “unknown god” they had not yet met. It was really a witness to the Greeks humility that they never quite had things clear in a very complex world.

That was 300 years ago. Greeks still thought of themselves as the apex of all cultures, but the Romans ruled them, too. Greeks were on the wane:

- They had become superficial more than sophisticated.
- They had become prideful more than humble.
- They had become pseudo-intellectual more than inquiring.
- They had become culturally religious more than personally faithful.

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Greeks had reached the time in their culture where religion was all around, but sophisticates did not really think any gods relevant. They continued to go to the temples, and religion ranked high in the public polls, but faith was not important to living daily life.

Paul says that the “unknown god” of the Greeks is not a member of the Pantheon of a democracy of gods for different situations. Paul’s phrase can also be translated “the god they know vaguely” - superficially. He is telling the Athenians that scratching the surface of all the gods has kept them from exploring deeply the unknown true God who can be fully known. The God Known as Jesus Christ is the only true god who governs all the realms of the false gods.

- This God is the creator of the whole cosmos.
- This God transcends the need for human support.
- This God is source and sustainer of human life. “In him we live and move and have our being.”
- This God is the ruler of all life - Humans can ignore God, but their need to respond to God will send them off to all kinds of idols that sooner or later distort their life and make them less than human.
- This God demands “repentance” - turning away from false gods we make to an active relationship with the true God who made us.
- This God is no “vague” “superficial” “fill-in-the-blanks” deity that looked like their wants and drives.

So, just how Greek are we about God or our gods? Do we pick and choose our gods to suit the situation? Do we have a democracy of first loyalties that we shuffle – family, nation, health, some cause, some personal-preference “love”?

Do we know God only vaguely? Do we redefine our gods in our own images? Do we see God as a set of intellectual beliefs to separate the good from the bad people? Do we see our God as a prime definer of *some* of our behaviors, *some* of our relationships, *some* of our loyalties?

If we described our god, how much would God look like our wants and drives and priorities and loyalties?

Jesus is the appearance of the real God beyond the Greek’s intellect and fabrications. The “unknown God” has made himself known. Paul says this god *as* Jesus is different from their other gods they no longer take seriously. This God has come to us in the most-particular form, the most-understandable medium.

This true God has come to us as a **truly** human person, not a falsely human person as we become less than human in chasing after less than gods. We can only become truly human by living like the only one “in whom we live and move and have our being” who also shows us our true life and being.

Paul’s points made sense to Greeks that were listening with open ears. His arguments were logical and clear in ways that made new knows about the “unknown” or “vaguely known” god a viable option, something to think about. They listened quietly in the crowd, and go away saying he was interesting, and went away to life unchanged.

We sophisticated Presbyterians are a little like thinking Greeks - no surprise when our educated thinking has Greek birth. We would never directly disagree with Paul’s appeal. We go back to our daily living as usual.

So, here is a question that comes out of what Paul was saying about the known God who makes us known in different ways by true deity/true human appearing: **How much of our daily living is a little less than human when we measure it by the truly human God who has come in a very particular form and a very understandable way?**

Paul says the true God who becomes known as Jesus is more important because Jesus makes “true human” known, too. That is why Paul calls the Greeks and us to “repent.” We must turn back to “true human” because we are less-than-human.

Most of us probably have reservations about that word “repentance” - thinking that we are not evil and faith is an added dimension of meaning to our lives lived well. So, let’s translate Paul’s appeal, and say that what our culture needs - and maybe what we need - is some “replacement therapy.” We have this pantheon of loyalties and desires and activities and interests that we think are all-important and meaningful and worth our effort, depending on the context

and situation. At family times, our gods take on “family values.” When we are at work, “company policy” rules. When we are in “patriot” mode, God has best be on “our side.”

In truth they surround us with conflicting pulls, and no one god can be at the center. Picking which god for the situation puts us at the center. What makes us a little less than human is this self-centeredness. We take the place that humans never take, because humans cannot be at the center where God belongs. We live a culture where wants and drives are more self-centered than Greeks or Romans could ever imagine. The gods who drive us make us “a little less than humans” and they make us false gods.

We might listen more carefully to the appeal Paul makes to the Greeks - the one that is logical and clear: the God who made the whole cosmos is the one who created truly human life to depend upon divine “being”, and God has come as Jesus to show us not only who God really is, but who humans are. If we are to become truly human, we must become more like Jesus. And where we are less-than-Jesus, we are less than human.

How do we get to know the unknown God? How do we get past the “vague” god who looks like us? What is required is that we replace our superficial “fill in the blanks” choosing of gods to suit the situation with a deep recognition that we live and move and have our being in Jesus who is the only ruler of our existing.

The problem is that if truly “human” is to be viable, we must do more than the intellectual entertaining of the idea. Thinking about what is human will not move us from less-than-truly-human. Studying Jesus will not make us more than less-than-human. It takes the “turning away from less than human and turning toward the truly human. It takes “repenting.” It takes replacement for the therapy.

The way we become truly human like Jesus is so simple that you might think it was divinely inspired, so simple that anyone can do it. Jesus gave them the instructions that night in a room after his resurrection, and the ones who followed the instructions turned toward him. And the ones who followed him became more like him.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. *On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.*”