

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

The Unknown God

Acts 17

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“I can see that you are very religious.”

That’s how Paul opens a speech to the elite, thought shapers of Athens. He was standing on a rock outcropping you can go stand on still today, called the Areopagus, speaking to a group of philosophically minded men. They brought him there because he was saying some things around town they thought both strange and alluring. So they set him on the rock, gave him a microphone (so to speak), and stepped back to listen to what this man had to say. This man, who they perceived to be another provocative philosopher, but who in reality was an apostle of Jesus Christ, the Won of God, raised from the dead; he who gives life and calls all people to repentance and new life in him. And as they would discover, he was a pretty good preacher!

He begins, “Men of Athens, I see how extremely religious you are.”

Would they have heard that as a compliment or an insult? Is it a compliment to be told: “you seem to be an extremely religious person”?

I don’t think most people today consider that a compliment. The meaning of words changes over time. When we talk about a religious person or an extremely religious person, we are usually wary of them. We have words for this: religious zealot, religious freak, religious hypocrite. Religious-ness and religion are held in disdain even by Christians who say things like “Christianity is not a religion, it’s a relationship.”

Of course, that implies that something is a religion that Christianity is not. I think usually what’s meant by that is an institution, a set of rituals and rules governing scrupulous behavior but without a living, breathing sense of the divine spirit. So some people say they are spiritual but not religious. But words change their meaning over time, and in ancient times, that’s not really what being religious meant.

Being religious meant you were conscientious; you had a sense of right and moral obligation, a duty to something bigger than yourself. It meant something like a sense of respect and decorum, or obligation that you took seriously. In other words, what people mean now by spiritual, they meant then by religious. The Athenians were very religious people; their religiousness led them to erect statues and altars all through the city to the Greek gods, and there were many of them.

So Paul, a Jew committed to the one true God, stands in front of them and says in effect, “I see that you are very committed to a sense of right and moral obligation, and duty to something bigger than yourselves. I see that you take your obligations seriously. I see that in all the altars

and temples on every corner of the city's streets to the gods of Greece: altars to every conceivable deity in the pantheon: to Athena of course, to Ares, whose rock we're standing on, to Aphrodite, and to Dionysus. The gods of war and slaughter, of fertility and wine. You have seen to it that every possible power beyond yourselves, and every animalistic instinct within yourselves, is accounted for with statues and altars everywhere and all the priests and rituals associated with them fully funded and established. You've thought of everything. I'm very impressed.

From a committed monotheist like Paul, it was a backhanded compliment, whether they understood it or not. Being religious, when seen in this way, is a way to ensure that you've done everything you can to make life turn out right by trying to do whatever you can to make all the gods happy so they give you what you need to survive and thrive: rain for your crops, babies and health for your wife, victory in your wars. All of that is a reason why what Paul says to them can be translated, as it is in the King James version: "I see that you are very *superstitious*."

I don't know that I love that translation for the word there, but it does help in one important sense. The lines can be blurry between religion, superstition, and genuine faith.

On the podcast *This American Life* recently, the story was told of a husband and wife in New Jersey who desperately wanted to attend a hockey match in Madison Square Garden. Normally they would catch a cab into the city. But it was Sabbath, and according to their religious commitments, you don't drive on the Sabbath. They weren't really practicing their faith, praying, or communing with God in any other part of their lives, but the strict Sabbath observance thing was ingrained in them both from childhood. So what to do? They decided the only thing that they could do is walk. 14 miles. So they did. Is that religion or faithfulness or superstition? They walked 14 miles, alongside slabs of chaotic highways, through neighborhoods they had little business being in, blistered feet, 14 miles to the arena to watch their favorite team play and cheer them on—not even in person, but in an away playoff game they watched on the jumbotron. That's commitment, if nothing else.

"Why didn't you just drive?" the incredulous interviewer asked. To the secular mind, things like this don't make sense at all.

"Fear," the man said. "We were afraid. Deep down, I was convinced that if we drove and the team lost, it was because God punishing us for driving on the Sabbath." So they made sure to do their part to pay respect to the God of the Sabbath who, apparently, also cares who wins a hockey game. So you can imagine how stunned they were when their team lost 4-1, got drubbed, no matter how many miles they walked to honor the Sabbath. As they stood there in stunned disbelief, at the final horn, "We should have drove," his wife said. It was more than just a wisecrack. It was a theological crisis.

I thought it was a fascinating story. Their commitment to Sabbath exceeds just about any commitment I have to anything religious, let's be honest. I can hardly resist a cookie during Lent, but they could walk 14 miles to honor Sabbath. Then again, is walking 14 miles to watch a

game really honoring the Sabbath Day of rest and worship? And does the God of the Sabbath care about who wins a hockey game? Of course not. Football, we all know. But surely not hockey.

Paul looks over the highly committed group of city dwellers, who have devoted their lives to the expression of their religion. He says, "I see that you are very religious, you even have an altar to the unknown God." I found myself wishing someone had been in the lives of those two people dejected at the end of that game, in that crisis, when they were questioning their decisions and doubting their faith, and as the story goes, abandoning it after that experience. I wish someone had been there to say something like, "I see that you are very religious. You certainly have a devotion to things that are important to you. You may have created an idol of the team, but you've certainly created an altar in your heart to a God you don't really seem yet to know."

The unknowingness of God is profound. The Athenians were so committed to appeasing the gods that they created an altar to an unknown god just in case there was a god they hadn't yet thought of. In Christianity, God is still ultimately beyond our knowledge. In a way, every Christian prayer, every theology, every sermon about God falls somewhere short of the truest truth and fullest knowledge of God. Kierkegaard described God as infinitely, qualitatively other. Whatever concept we have of God, whatever we can say with absolute confidence about God is not yet God because God is beyond even our best concepts. God is like a father, yes, and beyond it. God is like a mother. Yes, and beyond that, too. God is love, yes, and beyond our ideas of what our concept of love is. God is powerful, yes, and way beyond and way other than what we think of as power.

God is always other. Always beyond us. Always out of reach. Infinitely, ultimately unknown.

Remembering that truth about God's truth makes us humble. But it doesn't make us, or Apostle Paul, silent. Because God wasn't silent. God brought creation to being by speaking a word. God's Word spoke through the law, the prophets, and the poets. God's Word took flesh and dwelt among us. Paul leans in before this assembled group of unknown-god worshippers and says, "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you..." This instinct you have that there is a god who is beyond what you can say and carve and appease and name is *true*. The impulse you have to worship that which is beyond the gods of this earth, even the pantheon of popular superstition--this is true, and isn't this good news?

The unknown God, the god unknown to you yet, is not found in altars made of stone or statues made of gold. God does not live in shrines made by human hands. We do not create the gods; God created us and all the world. God is Lord of heaven and earth. The God unknown to you is the Creator of all that is, even you. Your statues are supposed to image the gods, but you are made in God's image; you are a beloved creature of God. You may have carved the statues of the gods, But the God of the universe shaped you out of the clay.

And all the world is in His hands, and even more all the world, all our lives are held—in grace and judgment—by the one man he has appointed, and he has given us assurance of all of this, by raising him from the dead.

All religious speech, and act, no matter how carefully stated, how intricately carved, no matter how scrupulous and ecumenical and affirming, no matter how self-confident or polite, or self-righteous and violent, all of it shatters before the resurrected body of Jesus. Because to speak of the resurrection of Jesus is no longer religious speech, but speech that challenges reality, reorients how we see earth and sky, water and dirt, land and animals, and even our own bodies. This is speech that evokes a decision: either laugh at it or listen to it, either leave or draw near to this body. It is his body or your stones. (adapted from Willie Jennings, Acts, 178)

Here near the end of this Easter season, we remember that Christian proclamation isn't babbling or just dabbling in religious speech. It's a matter of life and death. And the God who we proclaim doesn't just give rain and sun, grain and babies, but is the God of life and the sovereign over death. Christian proclamation isn't just to assemble some superstitious scaffolding around an otherwise religion-less life.

It's a call to come, to lay down the altars of your own making, to come before the Lord of lords and God of gods, and to knock down the idols our heart has manufactured. To come before the one who claims all of our lives, shatters all our idols, and has the power to take us through death into eternal life.

All creation, all God's acts of love and mercy, God's interventions, and the divine mystery, from the rising of the sun to its setting, is all an appeal from a good and loving God that God's children would grope for the divine presence and long for the transcendent and not be satisfied with anything, anything less. Our hearts are restless until they come to rest in God. Ultimate rest in God is surely beyond this life; a promise that awaits us. Until that day, all is gift: mommies and daddies and children and seasons of life, celebrations and even failures and loneliness and grief. All things in grace, and in time, shall lead us to the arms of our maker who redeems those who despair of a world of our own making where small little idols and our small little selves still hunger for something true and transcendent and holy.

Thanks be to God.

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