

Getting to Know “The Unknown God”

Acts 17:22-25

November 2, 2008

If you were a person with a strong appetite for religion, Athens was THE place to be in those days. The city was like a religious “outlet mall” or theme park, featuring almost every known practice and belief. Something like this section of Sheridan Boulevard with our six churches in a few blocks representing a whole spectrum of religious belief, gods in Athens were to be found on almost every corner, catering to almost every preference and whim. Then, too, just in case anyone still felt religiously left out, they even had this one statue to an anonymous, generic, all-purpose, do-it-yourself deity: “the unknown god.” If one couldn’t find something in Athens to tickle his religious proclivities, he mustn’t be trying.

Not surprisingly, the apostle Paul didn’t do very well in Athens. It wasn’t that he was persecuted or ridiculed as in several other places. His problem in Athens was that everyone was quite comfortable in the mushy, hybrid, eclectic, general religiousness of Athens. They already oozed and dripped of whatever god or gods were the current rage. There were gods who demanded flagellating themselves to punish the body for the sake of the soul. There were the sacred orgies down at First Fertility Chapel. And there was everything in between. So they regarded Paul’s teaching with a yawn – a ho-hum.

It may have borne similarity to a conversation overheard by a teacher, between two 5th-grade girls. The one fifth-grader said, “My mother is a Catholic and my father is Jewish.” Her friend then asked, “So what do you believe?” The first one replied, “I believe in everything.” “What do you mean everything?” her friend asked. “You know,” she answered, “Jesus, Uncle Sam, Jehovah, Moses, Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny – everything.”

For some it seems to be like that, and not necessarily only with children. As the psychologist-philosopher William James wrote after his years of research on religion, “Most people will believe almost anything, and they would believe everything if they could.” Dr. James may have overstated it, but as an observer, either in ancient Athens or in 21 Century Western civilization, it’s sometimes difficult to argue with him. It gets to be a very confusing, and not entirely admirable religious picture.

Next Sunday and up until the 23rd of this month, Pledge Sunday, we will be involved in a stewardship campaign. We hope to have some personal testimonies of stewardship commitment. This year we are certainly aware of the economic picture; there are so many people hurting financially, to say nothing about the foreclosures, the housing market, and almost every segment of our society. So we face a tremendous challenge financially in supporting our church and its mission. The members of this church have responded so well over the years, and we certainly find ourselves seeking answers about our future mission and program. It is especially urgent now that we step our

in faith to make our congregation a lively, active force in the service of Jesus Christ in this community. Unless you are very new here, you already know that, notwithstanding what is becoming quite incomprehensible about the religious picture, this is a church and denomination that is more open to widely diverse beliefs than are most. So we address the issue of “branding,” which is essentially how we present ourselves to the community.

We ARE a Christian church – a church that presents the New Testament as a unique Word of God to us. But still, we recognize that the Christian faith unfolds and expresses itself in as many ways as there are human beings. We find all of that diversity exciting and very stimulating, even though there are certainly persons of other faiths who might consider it appalling. They consider the church’s job to be that of telling its members what they need to believe, what they need to practice and precisely what will damn them and what will save them.

We refuse to do that. We try to raise good questions. We try to make people think. We encourage a growing “spiritual edge” to each person. As the poster has it on our Christian Education bulletin board, “We find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes.” We examine together what has turned out to be people’s experience of God in the scripture and subsequently, we’ll do all we can to be supporting, comforting and helpful in whatever God might be doing and awakening in each person. But that is as far as we’ll go. The rest of it is left on the lap of each one of us – is between each person and God.

So what then is hoped will come true here, will unfold here, and will nurture each of us in the worship experiences, the serving, the learning, and the enjoyment that are part of this community of faith?

The first concern is this. If, as is true of some of you, you come here from a negative, troubling, hypocritical or authoritarian religious background, and therefore find yourself nervous, suspicious and dubious about almost everything of a religious nature, try to relax and let go of that when you come through the doors of this place. We, in this place, are far from perfect and we certainly have our own quirks and probably some pretensions on which we need to be working. And yes, some of the ancient, inscrutable, difficult-to-identify-with content and traditions of Christianity will remain a part of our life as a church.

That, notwithstanding, though, count on this. The God we share here is not the rigid, brittle, guilt-dispensing, vindictive god that terrorized the religious backgrounds of some of us. The overwhelming majority of persons who gather here, know that that monster-god doesn’t exist and never did. If you can simply embrace that fact, it ought to make it unnecessary to continue to react against it, against all of the junk that went with it, and against whatever there may still be of it. Be done with it – let go of it.

That having been said and done, we can turn to the vital matter of the strengthening, enriching and affirming of whatever is the particular spirituality that God created in you and me. Make no mistake about it, there IS a spiritual side to you. It may be a bit out of the ordinary and maybe somewhat dormant, but it IS there. For some it's quite overt and expressive. For others, it is quiet, very internal and difficult to put into words.

A story or analogy that offers an image tells of a young boy who went out to fly his new kite on a day that happened to be overcast and very foggy. Still, there was a good breeze and he had plenty of string, so the kite not only flew, but climbed into the fog and was completely out of sight. A neighbor, who was something of a tease, came out and asked the boy what he was doing, standing out there holding a string. The boy told him. The neighbor, pretending to be bewildered, looked up in the air and then said gravely, "No, I'm afraid not. You may have once had a kite, but it's not up there any more. It's long gone. You might as well go do something else." But the boy, unfazed, said, "I can't see it either, but I know it's still there because I can feel the tug."

There are a great many ways in which we human beings have known something like that "tug," that feeling of "connectedness," that sense of there being more going on than is visible on the surface of life. It can be a very emotional tug. It can impinge upon us as insight or intuition. It may come as awe and wonder. Sometimes it's communal in nature. Then, right here, gathered in the church are everything from persons who embrace few if any of the standard, orthodox beliefs of traditional Christianity to those whose spirituality is built explicitly upon the most familiar, orthodox Christian doctrines and affirmations, and there is everything in between. We hope that we're a church community in which, no matter where you fall on the religious spectrum, it will be taken seriously here, will be received open-mindedly, and will find nourishment here.

A Gallup poll a few years ago indicated that nearly a third of all non-churched people, claim that they would really like to be a part of a church if they could find one in which they didn't end up being made to feel inferior or hypocritical or under pressure because of their reservations, misgivings or inability to conform to a church's religious dogma and practice. It's hoped that we're a congregation that welcomes such persons enthusiastically: as our sign on the bulletin board states: "believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all races and cultures, those of all classes and abilities, those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope." Our dream is of a church full of persons, each with his or her own unique appetite for pursuing and nourishing his or her faith journey, whatever that means and wherever it leads. Nothing could be more dull, stagnant and deadly than a congregation made up of religiously identical clones!

All benefits of spiritual diversity having been considered, though, there definitely is the possibility of falling off the other side of it. One can, unfortunately, make a kind of small “r” religion out of knee-jerk skepticism, dilettantism, and of remaining always vague and tentative about everything. It’s a brand of shallowness that’s sometimes passed off as sophistication, or as open-mindedness, or as being “intellectual.”

Why would a person want that? It’s because people with passionate beliefs risk being pulled along by their beliefs, shaped by them, even changed by them. Cynicism, on the other hand, is safe, predictable, and undemanding. It’s the downside of spiritual freedom, never an example of it, so don’t be seduced by it.

Meanwhile, without exception, every one of us has work to do and growth to accomplish for ourselves. There are areas of our thinking that have hardened and need to be re-opened. There are neglected dreams, smothered hopes, and discoveries about ourselves that need our attention. And we’re the only ones who can do it.

That, then, brings us to the matter of you and me and that which actually goes on here. We don’t claim to know just what, at any particular time, is most likely to be moving, inspiring, lifting, restoring, or healing for every one of us. For one it may be music, for another: ideas, another may be renewed through silent meditation, being challenged or being forgiven will be what yet others need, and for still others the nurturing that comes of simply being together becomes God’s grace to them.

We DO know, though, after many centuries of Christian church experience, that stepping aside together like this, for moments of transcendence, for renewing our thankfulness, for asking forgiveness, or maybe to gain a glimpse of our lives against the bigger picture as God sees it, is, in some inexplicable way, profoundly worth doing. Deliberate opening, for an hour or so, of our minds to different kinds of experience or reality, the shifting away, for a bit, from the dictates of the intellect to the tug of the spirit, the allowing ourselves, however briefly, to reaffirm, explore and enjoy the fact that there is more to us than we had been in touch with, is all profoundly healthy. Multiple studies have now shown, that people who worship regularly, and who are a part of a church, are measurably healthier and live longer. I can’t begin to explain that, but it has shown up in too many studies to ignore.

So a strong case can be made that regularly setting aside time apart for worship, for reflecting upon what your life means, for self-understanding, for renewing your hope, and in general, for restoring the soul of you, really is as important as anything you do for yourself, as long as you pursue it seriously and honestly.

Which brings us to final matter: where you and I end up in your convictions and values. The beliefs that you are forming and embracing DO make a difference. Your financial commitments to the

church, your stewardship, is going to make a huge difference. All of our talk, as UCC'ers, about how unique to you should be the beliefs that come together in you, doesn't mean that it makes no difference what you believe as long as you believe something. Members of the Ku Klux Klan are ardent believers, as are Shiite terrorists, as are the anti-abortionists who bomb clinics or murder physicians, as are often the most obnoxious elitists and the most arrogant of tyrants. If I choose to embrace the idea that it is a dog-eat-dog world in which good is impossible and evil inevitable, I will be on the way to becoming the kind of xenophobic, suspicious, predatory animal that fits such a world. If I believe everything about my life is already determined, that too will profoundly affect what becomes of me. If, on the other hand, I believe that I am here purposefully, sharing creative powers with God for pursuing undreamed-of possibilities, that too will become who I am. Once again, what we are believing is what we are becoming.

That's why it isn't enough, simply to join a religious body that has a dozen points of doctrine that sound okay, and letting that be it for you. Nor is it safe just to go ahead and believe what that remarkable religious writer came up with, nor even to take, as a whole, the beliefs of a wonderfully devout friend who you admire. No, your beliefs, your values, your configuration of concerns should be your own work of spiritual art; and dare I add, your financial commitments to this church: a life-long, work-in-progress, changing, growing and renewing itself. It entails constantly asking oneself hard questions about motivations, rationalizations, self-deceptions. It ought to keep nudging us beyond whatever is a little too easy and comfortable for us right now. Especially, it ought to cause us to expand the walls of life rather than pull them in around us. Growth or shriveling – one or the other – is going on in us. What you believe about life and the world and God and the terms of our being here, decides which. This is, again, a lifelong task. Anyone who thinks he's completed it, IN PARTICULAR, has NOT!

So let's be particularly clear about this: in addition to, and in the midst of, the fun, the practical issues, the lighter activities, the traditions, the flashes of inspiration, THIS is what you and I, each in our own way, at our own pace, and out of our own needs, need to pursue for ourselves as a part of this church – this marvelously diverse, nurturing, and stimulating congregation. It should be enjoyable as well as being tremendously important. I hope you can be as excited about all that can yet become of us, as, without doubt, is God.