

“To an Unknown God”
Sermon at FCCFC
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Scripture: Acts 17:22-31

I am sure many of you have heard the story of the child who was hard at work in the kindergarten art class one day. The teacher asked the child what they were painting. The child said, “I am painting a picture of God.” The teacher then very kindly said to the child, “But, dear, no one knows what God looks like.” “They will when I’m finished!” the child replied.

This is funny precisely because the notion of drawing a picture of God is so impossible. The Bible itself is of little help in this regard. As we go looking for instances in the Bible where God puts in a personal appearance, here are some descriptions to choose from: God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush; God leads the nation of Israel out of Egypt as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; God speaks to Job and his friends out of the whirlwind; God comes to Elijah as a still, small voice. Not much there for a definitive portrait of God.

I sometimes pity poor Moses. Imagine trying to explain the whole burning bush thing to the leaders of Israel. And then Moses tries for a little clarification, asking God, “Who shall I say sent me? What is your name?” God’s answer is recorded in Exodus: “I am who I am. Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I Am has sent me to you.” Not very helpful – but maybe as precise as God can be in conveying the reality of God’s presence to people of limited understanding.

Apparently, knowing God has never been easy, from the very beginning. And if you follow current news accounts, the world in general seems to be increasingly skeptical of the existence of God. It is not too hard to understand why. Start with the difficulty of explaining God in the first place. Add to that the changing understanding of our world brought about by advances in science, space exploration, telescopes, computers. And then there is the problem that, for so many of us, the works of man dominate our vision, our hearing, and our experience. It used to be a humbling thing to look up at night into the vastness of the universe, but who can experience that these days? A few of us may get a glimpse of the heavens as the ancients used to see them in places of quiet and isolation, but it is usually only for a night or two, and then we come back to a world where the works of man dominate the scene, trees and flowers stand where we have planted them, and the noise of traffic and machines masks the sounds of breezes and birdsongs.

Yet, while belief in God is waning, worship is just as strong as it ever has been. That may strike you as a bit incongruous – fewer believe in God, yet worship goes on? But there is much worship in the world. One definition of worship is “to feel an adoring reverence or regard for (any person or thing).” The truth is, we people seem to have an

inclination, maybe even a need, to worship. The question becomes, how do we fill that need? Who, or what, do we worship?

I was particularly struck by one of the lines in the Scripture reading from Acts. Paul says he “went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of [their] worship.” Imagine such an exercise today. In your mind, go walking through our city. It should not be too hard to find objects of our worship as a society. Even easier, turn on your television. Your t.v., or these days the internet, will take you on a tour of people and objects of our reverence and adoration without even leaving your house. Or maybe you can browse for objects of worship on your smart phone. For some people, the smart phone itself may be an object of great veneration!

In Paul’s day, in Athens, apparently many things competed for the people’s worship; but the God of the Bible was not among them. Yet, there seemed to be a hunger for something more. Someone, somewhere in the City of Athens, anticipated another possibility. An altar was erected, and stood waiting, for the worship of an “unknown God.” Are things so different in our day?

How possible is it to know God? Assuming that we know God is, and always has been, a perilous endeavor. Remember Job and his friends, who thought they knew God? Do you remember God’s answer? “Who is this that darkens counsel with words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” And this is just the beginning. God goes on like this for four chapters! And even so, we know God is just scratching the surface, speaking of things that are within our experience to understand. Job is a difficult book to read, even harder to understand, but if you have never done so, read sometime from chapter 38 to the end of the book. Nowhere in the Bible will you find such beautiful poetry focused on the wonder and the mystery of God.

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” Or, if you prefer, here is the New Living translation: “Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words?” And yet we do, far more often than I like to think. Fortunately, we generally avoid the most extreme examples of this, but the examples are out there, further poisoning the atmosphere among those who might want to believe, but are turned off by the likes of the Westboro Baptist Church and their hateful speech and actions, or Terry Jones and his “Dove World Outreach Center,” whose so-called “ministry” is to burn Korans and spread fear and hatred of our Muslim neighbors. As I read news reports about these and similar groups of misguided people who think they are following the “true word of God,” often these words come to my mind: “Who is this than darkens counsel with words without knowledge?”

All too often, in our quest to know God, we are like the blind men and the elephant. For those who do not know this story, it is a parable that originated in India, and has found

form in various societies and traditions, including Hindu and Buddhist writings. In short, blind men go to learn for themselves, through what they can observe, what an elephant is like. One man, feeling the elephant's side, concludes that the elephant is like a wall. A second man feels the tusk, and decides that the elephant is like a spear. A third man feels the knee and proclaims that the elephant is like a tree; a fourth feels the tail and swears the elephant is like a rope, and so on. In the Buddhist version, the Buddha concludes the story with this verse, roughly translated into English:

O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim
For preacher and monk the honored name!
For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.
Such folk see only one side of a thing.⁴¹

I do not offer these examples as a way of suggesting that we ought not strive to know God; they are cautionary tales, offered to remind us all not to become too certain of our own knowledge, not to become arrogant toward the beliefs of others, and that what we can come to know of God will necessarily be limited by our own knowledge and experience. The reality is that God does not like being put in a box, and is not inclined to stay there.

With such caution in mind, I want to return to the wonderful language and imagery of this morning's scripture reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Paul writes, "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 if he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – for indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being.'"

And despite my words earlier about the Bible being of little help when trying to draw a picture of God, the Bible is of considerable help when trying to come to know the nature and being of God. In fact, that is the main purpose of the book. That being said, I will not be trying a "Reduced Shakespeare Company" treatment of the Bible. That is, will not try to summarize all that the Bible has to say about the nature and being of God in one hour. But I will highlight a few things that I think the scriptures illustrate clearly.

First, as Jesus says in John's gospel, and as the scriptures affirm over and over, God is Spirit. The truths of the Bible are intended, first and foremost, to be spiritual truths. If you are going to come to know God, you have to accept that part of your own being is spiritual, and that spirit needs to be fed and nurtured just as surely as your physical and mental being must be fed and nurtured. While more difficult to zero in on, my sense of your spiritual being is that it is a part of you that senses and longs for a connection to the world around you, and to those around you who inhabit that world with you. It is part of our kinship that goes beyond blood. It is on this level that God comes to us, binding us

together, helping our understanding, adding depth and meaning to our lives, satisfying a hunger that we can't even clearly describe. The spirit is a mystery, and yet people have perceived the presence of spirit since ancient times, have sought its presence. If you are here, it is probably because you either perceive this presence, or you seek it, or maybe you perceive it, but seek to know it more completely, to let it fill you, and to share it with others.

Second, there may be no more concise description of God than this: God is Love. Whatever you read in the scriptures must be read in this light. Your understanding must be filtered through the lens of love. Repeatedly, the scriptures tell of God's loving nature. The loving spirit of God seeks to build up, and not to tear down; seeks to heal and not to hurt; seeks to feed and not to deprive; seeks to give and not to take; seeks peace and understanding, not war and strife. If your faith includes hatred, strife or antagonism as part of its ministry, you do not know God.

Third, look to Christ as your example if you seek to know God, for Jesus came to point the way to God. Though there is much about God that we cannot see and is beyond our experience, the scriptures say of Jesus, "In him, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." In the example of Christ, we find one who sought connection with all God's children, who showed compassion to all regardless of background. In this country, in this time and place in our society, it is hard for us to understand how radical it was, how much it ran against the social norms of Jesus' day, when Jesus reached out to women, healed lepers, and made a Samaritan the hero of one of his parables. Who are the outcasts of our day, the ones the rest of our society says we should not embrace? Those are precisely the ones Jesus would be inviting in. Jesus' ministry was one of healing, of compassion, of sacrifice, of forgiveness, of inclusion. This is a glimpse of the nature of God, and of what God intends for the world.

One final word about seeking to know God: it is a journey, not a destination. It is a process, not a single action. Be open to the leading of the spirit, and allow for an evolution of your understanding. Jesus brought an understanding of God that was different than the understanding of his ancestors. Our understanding is different than that of churches a hundred years ago. God gave us our brains. We should use them. My own understanding today is different than my understanding of twenty, thirty, forty years ago. The God I seek to know is not different, but my understanding of God is different. As Paul notes in 1st Corinthians, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

There might have been a day, a long time ago, when I too, might have tried to draw a picture of God. But God long ago left the canvas, for God is too big and too wonderful to stay on the page. There is much about God that I will never know and understand; but the part of God I have come to know has borne me through much in life, and has created bonds of friendship and kinship with people who have made my life more wonderful. I invite you to join in the search for God, and, in the words of Paul, to perhaps grope for

him and find him. Indeed, he is not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move and have our being.

Let us pray: Creator God, allow us to practice resurrection through coming to know you better. Be with us in such a way that your presence becomes known to us, both as we seek to fill ourselves with your spirit, and as we share that spirit with others. For we know that the vision to see you comes both with looking outside ourselves and looking within. Bless our journey together. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.