

In search of an "unknown god" in the land of Plato

A sermon by John Strommen on Acts 17:16-31 April 29, 2018

Many of you have seen the battle of wits in the comedy, *The Princess Bride*. It begins with an overconfident character named Vezzini who has kidnapped the love of a man named Wesley, who is about to rescue her. Rest assured, in this scene, it's pure comedy and nothing happens to the woman who appears to be in danger.

(Film clip)

Now, you may be wondering, what on earth does this have to do with our lesson in the book of Acts? Well, it seems that the apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, found himself in Athens to engage in a battle of wits with the local Athenians. And yes, Athens was the very place that the "morons" Plato, Aristotle and Socrates lived, taught and debated (pic #1 of Plato, Aristotle). Here we see a famous painting by Raphael of Plato and Aristotle debating, surrounded by a crowd. And they often did so right where our story today takes place: at the Areopagus (pic #2 looking down on the hill), on top of a famous hill in Athens called Mars Hill that is located right beneath the Acropolis (pic #3 looking up at Acropolis). The Areopagus was where the elders of the city held council and where people gathered to discuss and debate philosophy and religion.

While it is doubtful many Athenians referred to Plato, Aristotle and Socrates as morons, there were many Athenians who, like Vezzini from the Princess Bride, were quite confident in their intellectual abilities. And as this traveling evangelist named Paul came to town and started telling everyone about the God who became a human being, died and rose again, well, let's just say that many Athenians engaged Paul in a battle of wits and lively debate. Some laughed at him and called him a "babbler" - sort of a like calling him a hick. Others, though, took Paul seriously.

Now, Athens may have been the artistic, philosophic and even religious capital of the world, but they were not very familiar with this new religion from the Jewish world. And clearly some were intrigued enough that they wanted to hear more. So Paul was invited to the Areopagus to expound upon and defend his beliefs. Athens, like most of the rest of the world, believed in many gods (pic #5 statues of gods), a belief system commonly referred to as polytheism. The apostle Paul, however, espoused monotheism, proclaiming only *one God above all others*. In fact, for Paul there were no others. No doubt the Athenians were intrigued by Paul's message. How could there be just one God? (pic #6 cartoon) the comic shows the conundrum.

But that was only part of the fascination, I'm sure. Most religions at that time were heavily influenced by human interest and imagination, gods who were seen as powerful and whose favor would be cultivated to gain some earthly advantage (pic #7 pantheon of Greek gods). And Athens was known far and wide for its many, many gods and for its citizens who believed in almost all of them! The Greek gods, quick-fire gods for immediate relief, gods for the greedy, gods of ecstatic indulgence, gods of nationalism, gods of agriculture, gods to keep the poor happily poor, gods of gold, silver and stone. So these gods were all

about power and delivering positive results according to human agendas, that is, if people were able to appease them.

(pic #8 Jesus on cross) But the idea of a crucified God - especially the one and only God - was very, very different. This is not a quality that one would normally want in a god, namely, a god that bleeds and can die at the hands of human beings. Furthermore, this god Paul spoke of was not subject to human manipulations, but rather had a broad mission for *all of humanity* that transcended special interest groups or nations simply vying for his favor. This was no tribal god at all! Crazy? Probably, but fascinating, too, and this city was full of seekers. And Athenians always had room for more gods!

In fact, it was literally true that Athenians were searching for one more god, namely, the god they might have missed along the way. This restless feeling is expressed perfectly in the story of how there came to be an altar with the inscription to an "unknown god" referred to in the second paragraph, second sentence in our lesson today. Around 600 BC, Athens was devastated by a terrible plague. Athenians concluded they had offended one of the gods, and they were quite willing to make an offering to whatever god they had offended. The trouble was, they weren't sure which god had been offended. So the council at Areopagus did what any organization does in this situation: they hired a consultant, a man by the name of Epimenides. Epimenides quickly concluded none of Athens known gods had been offended. How he figured that out is anybody's guess. So, he reasoned, it had to be an unknown god they had offended, whom they somehow needed to appease. So they eventually made a sacrifice offering on Mars Hill, where the Areopagus is located, and *the famine ceased!* So they concluded that they had appeased this unknown god. Henceforth, they built a permanent altar dedicated to an unknown god. Here is the altar at the site, which has since been put in a museum (pic #9,10).

So when Paul is speaking to the Athenians, he recognizes this altar as a sign of their genuine interest in God and religion.

This fascination they had for an unknown god revealed something else: a general sense that they still hadn't found what they were looking for, as if they somehow knew that their notion of the gods was hollow and empty, and had only made God a prisoner of human imagination and motives and tribal instincts - "us" vs. "them." Perhaps the one true God was still out there somewhere, a god beyond their shrines and attempts to manipulate God by offering sacrifices. Paul therefore says to them: "The God who made heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything." (a reference to making sacrifices at an altar)

Do these people remind you of anyone today? The many who are searching and still haven't found what they're looking for? Yes, of course, it's a song by the famous rock band U2, but it's a whole lot more than that. It represents the many who believe in God in general, but don't believe anything in particular about God, because God is an unknown god to them! So they believe in a little bit of this, a little bit of that, a little new age, a little Christianity, whatever Oprah says, a little eastern religion thrown in, and whatever. But in the end, there is an emptiness. God is just a polyglot of images.

Or does ancient Athens sound a bit like the many out there today who put their faith in the god of the

stock market, or the god of social status and reputation, or the god of material possessions. And in the end, it's never enough, is it? Where is the unknown god? Where is the real thing?

To these seekers, Paul says: "What you therefore 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...he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."

What Paul is saying is that the one and true God is far beyond the confines of our shrines and the boxes we put God in - he made heaven and earth, after all - *and yet he is closer than we can imagine!* (pic #11) For Paul goes on to say that even though we may search and grope for this God, he is not far from each one of us, for "in him we live and move and have our being." He is quoting a Greek poet there, but it is so applicable to the God he proclaims.

(pic #12) So it is by God's very breath and word *and life* that we live! As Luther made clear, the living Word of God speaks us into existence moment by moment. We are dependent creatures in the most wonderful way: our very life comes from the eternal fountain of life! As the great theologian Paul Tillich described it: God is the *ground of our being*.

And if all this seems a little too abstract, Paul uses another analogy: "What you therefore worship as unknown, I proclaim to you...we are God's offspring!" God is not like gold, silver or stone. God is our parent and we are family - all of us, despite our differences.

Eventually Paul gets to Jesus, though. Indeed, God is closer than you can imagine. God became one of us, *in order that* God could fully know us, and we could know God. You want to know what the heart of God is, you look at Jesus, in whom the righteousness of God is crystal clear. In whom the righteousness of God is given away to us. Unknown God? I don't think so. Amen.