



## An Unknown God

*TEXT*  
*Acts 17:16–34*

July 9, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Paul finds himself in Athens, and they want to know about this new religion he is espousing. In Athens, they loved talking about the newest idea. Like some folks need to have the newest iphone or watch the newest movie, in Athens they wanted to talk about the newest idea. Folks said Paul could tell them about a new God. They wanted to hear more. But don't assume that they held him in high esteem. They were there to challenge him as much as anything. And nothing would be so rewarding than if they heard Paul out and could show him to be a fool. If you are the kind who likes to argue for sport, you would have loved ancient Athens.

Paul looks around and sees that Athens is covered in idols. That is a word that sounds so out of date. *American Idol* is a thing, but outside of that, we don't have idols. It's a word from another time, like using cassette tapes or navigating your way on a paper map or giving your child the name Percival. Nobody does this anymore.

A story about idols seems so irrelevant. But it's worth a second look.

What Paul rightly sees in Athens is a conversation about what human beings are for. What is our purpose? Do we even have purpose? This is not a question that is limited to philosophers. It is a question that emerges in adolescence as we begin to gain a sense of the size of the world and our own insignificance. Do I matter?

More than a few citizens of Athens believed that human life holds no ultimate purpose. Many argue the same today. We are just accidents of birth, with no real meaning or calling.

Archeologists have discovered a common inscription on graves in ancient Athens that reads: "I was not. I was. I am not. I do not care." That is to say, I existed for a while, but it was meaningless. I can't care if life has no purpose.

This may be a reason Athens was filled with idols. They were searching for something.

The practice of idolatry, the creation of statues or other objects of worship — I don't know anybody who does that anymore. But I do think the internal mental process that led to idolatry is as relevant today as ever.

Think about this: Why would someone create an idol — create an object to worship?

The only reason anyone would create a god is to have that god take care of you, to protect you, to make you prosperous. No one has ever created an idol that would expect something of you or demand anything of you. The idol *seems* like a god, but it's all about you.

I told you before that when I was in middle school, I went to a Billy Graham crusade. He preached a typical sermon for Billy Graham. He told us all if we prayed the right prayer, we would be saved. Otherwise, we would go to hell — and Billy Graham surely did not want that. I must admit as a middle school-aged kid, listening to Billy Graham, I was not clear about how upset God would be if I went to hell. He said it was good news, but it was hard to tell. I prayed the prayer. I didn't want to go to hell.

Now when I prayed that prayer, who was I concerned about? Who was I interested in? Who was I loving in that moment? Me! Not God, just me. The irony is that that kind of selfishness does not save us; that selfishness is actually what Jesus came to save me from. It's a modern day idolatry. It sounds like it's about God, but it's all about me.

Now I don't mean to offend, I really don't. But I think the temptation to think God's purpose is to protect me, to fulfill me, to make me prosperous, even to save me, is what idolatry looks like in modern life.

What Jesus revealed in his ministry was that it's too small to think of God existing to serve us; we exist to serve God. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Our lives are not meaningless because we serve the Lord of heaven and earth.

They took Paul to the Areopagus and said, *OK, you have a new idea. Let's hear it.* They were interested, but we should not confuse interest with openness. They were primarily there to argue with him; to point out how his philosophy doesn't hold up; to show how Paul is a fool.

Paul looks around and sees the city filled with idols. He sees a spiritual search. He sees that the understanding of God is contested. That sounds pretty contemporary to me.

Then he sees a statue "to an unknown god." He says, *I see you speak of a God you do not know. Let me tell you about the God I know.*

Paul tells them that unlike their idols, God is not someone we create, but rather God created us. God created all of us. So the spiritual questions we have are shared questions. He tells them that we all descend from a set of original parents, a way of saying we are all one family. He tells them that God

sent his son Jesus, who was raised from the dead. Some folks think he is crazy. A few believe and follow him. And others say, "We will hear you again about this."

Now when Paul describes Jesus, Paul doesn't describe him as one who comes in love, or as one who teaches, or as one who heals, or as one who lifts up the lowly and oppressed. No, not any of this! Paul says, *Jesus comes to judge us all. That's it. He comes to judge.*

Now tell me, what would make folks say, *Hmmm, we want to hear more about this Jesus who comes to judge?*

They clearly heard this Jesus of judgment as good news somehow, but how?

If I say judgment, you no doubt have a negative image. The church and judgment don't have a great track record.

In seminary, I learned of Michael Servetus. He was a Spanish scientist and Renaissance man. He was the first European to explain how the lungs pass oxygen to the bloodstream. He was also a man of deep faith. He was a contemporary of John Calvin, the father of Presbyterian faith.

Servetus did not believe in the Trinity. So there were consequences. Both the Catholic and Protestant churches branded him a heretic. He required judgment. Under John Calvin's leadership, Servetus was burned at the stake. Now Calvin thought this was too harsh. He thought Servetus should be extended mercy and simply shot. But the council

overruled Calvin, and he was burned at the stake.

So the church has made some progress. We don't do that anymore. But too many have experienced the judgment of the church — not as grace, but as pain. Women can speak to that. The poor can speak to that. The LGBT community knows all about that. The immigrant and foreigner can tell you about that.

There are many who have found their way to Village, bringing with them memories of having been condemned by the church. Such injuries are not easy to set aside.

So why did people want to hear Paul talk about judgment? If I understand it, the judgment of which Paul speaks is different than what I have been describing.

Meg McLaughlin said that her daughter — after an incident in their home, of which Meg said there are many — was sitting under the table in a huff, and she simply said, "I don't like consequences."<sup>1</sup> I get that.

So there are two kinds of consequences. There are the consequences that are imposed, and there are the consequences that simply result. The consequences that are imposed are the "go to your room" consequences. You did something. You got caught. Punishment is imposed.

I think most folks think of judgment like that. It is imposed. You got caught. Go to your room.

But the judgment of God is more like the consequences

that result. If I only eat ice cream, and the only exercise I get is working the ice cream scoop, my health declines. It just happens. If I am never kind and always grumpy, my relationships suffer. If I do not study for my exam, my grade suffers. It just happens. My teacher is my judge. Here's the thing: My teacher does not impose my grade on me; I make my own grade. My teacher just reveals the truth of my grade. The judgment is not imposed; it just results from my choices.

If I understand the text, what Paul sees in Jesus is a holy teacher who reveals to us the meaning of human life; reveals what the purpose of human living is. And when we look at him, we discover that how he loves — how he loves not just those who love him, but how he loves the least and the lost, the broken and the bruised, the prisoner and the oppressor — when we see how he loves, we see that there is a gap between how he loves and how we love. And that is judgment. It is not imposed. It is just results.

I think that is why folks wanted to hear more. Because discovering the truth about yourself is never easy — unless you already know that you do not have the answers, and you are hungry to know what your life is for. If we already know that the world is not right, that we have not completely grown up, that something is missing and you care, then finding a teacher who can show you the way is welcomed.

I hear the young adults in this church use a new word in the English vocabulary: *adulting*. It is often #*adulting*. It refers to the skills and responsibilities of claiming responsibility for your own life — like learning to iron; paying bills and even creating a budget; realizing that binging on *House of Cards* probably can't be the only thing you do on a weekend; learning when the low air pressure light on the car comes on, you should do something about it. Some say the biggest challenge is learning to cope with baby boomers. I'll try not to take that one personally.

While I hope I have a handle on most of these skills, on the big questions — how to be the person God calls us to be, how to be human in an often inhumane world — we are all *adulting*. We need a teacher, one who can show us what we are for.

Jesus is that revelation, for me.

I think that is why they wanted to hear more. When you know that you don't have all the answers, when you know that you haven't fully matured, when you know that you haven't figured out who to be in every circumstance, and you know that who you are has consequences, you would give anything to have someone give you the truth, show you the way.

The more I know about the life of Jesus, the more I want to know about his life; and the more I know about him, the more I understand what I am

for. I think that is why they said, "We will hear you about this again."

I don't know what will happen this week, but it is likely that in the world, we will see moments when the world could benefit from having some adults, some folks who demonstrate spiritual maturity. And it's possible that you stumble a bit this week; I hope not, but it's possible. And if you do, come back next Sunday. We will be here, and he will be here to teach us again or remind us what we are for. It will be judgment of sorts, but it will also be welcomed, gracious news.

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<sup>1</sup>From Meg's sermon preached at Burke Presbyterian Church, "Messengers on the Move," June 18, 2017

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.