



# “Unknown gods and Longing Hearts”

Texts: Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

For those of you who have been attending regularly since I began here, may remember me talking about my dear Palestinian friend, Osama. He was my dearest friend while I lived in the West Bank. The last time I mentioned him, I told the story of how the two American women showed up at the souvenir shop he ran for his uncle. The women had been told by God to go and convert the Muslims. I sat quietly and observed as they talked at Osama, never engaging him in their talking, never asking about him and his life.

If they had, they would have learned that due to the many oppressive factors in his life, with the two top ones being living under occupation and having a mentally ill father who couldn't provide for the family, Osama was desperate to find meaning in the life that he was born into. Yes, he needed a savior, but a savior would never come through the way these women were presenting Christ, even as well intentioned as they were.

If they had asked about his life, they would have found that in seeking meaning and purpose he had at one point in time become politically active, which had resulted in an arrest and his being banned from ever being able to attend university. The women would have heard how he had then thrown himself into Islam, praying five times a day, going to the mosque when possible, reading the Quran, but he hadn't found God. He had even tried finding God through Christianity before these women

had ever entered his shop. I don't remember what he did when he was looking into Christianity; but whatever it was, it wasn't the right path to learn the truth about who Christ is and what Christ could do for him. Unfortunately, there are too many Osamas in this world. People seeking understanding, seeking something greater than themselves.

I thought about Osama as I read this passage from Acts. Paul finds himself in Athens and finds endless statues of gods that the Athenians were worshipping. There was even one for an unknown god. We know that there were gods for fertility, for rain, for many things that would meet their daily needs, but their needs weren't being met and so more gods were created, even this unknown god which, I suppose, was one that they could pray to for things that the other gods didn't cover.

Since the beginning, people have been creating gods in their lives; gods to bring them comfort, to bring them understanding and meaning, to give them hope. I would guess that if each of us thought about it long enough, we could find gods in our lives that we worship, even now.

I grew up in a house full of food. We had this large pantry that was always stocked as was the freezer and refrigerator. My dear, beloved, Christ-filled mother would often say that she was the product of the depression; and having the house well stocked brought comfort, peace. Running low on food created anxiety. This message was passed down to us kids, and while I don't have the stocked kitchen that she had, it is still more stocked than it needs to be and my sister's kitchen is even more stocked than mine ever was. In a sense, the cans of food that filled that pantry were a god. Their presence brought comfort and a sense of security.

It is those kinds of things that you may find yourself worshipping. Perhaps not food, but money, status, materialism, the latest technology. There are so many things that are in our lives or are available to us that can become gods to us. And this is not to condemn these things, but it is important to seek out what in our lives might have become a god to us and then to sit with that and try to understand the need within that this thing is meant to fulfill.

But in each of these cases, people's needs, fears, desires, insecurities, have allowed them to make gods of things that will never bring them the peace, hope, and fulfillment that they long for.

This passage in Acts is about sharing the Good News with those who are in need of the living God. I read that the Athenians had over 30,000 idols. I also read that none of those idols dealt with the heart, with the spiritual side of a person. They had their gods but they didn't have the living God to breathe life, purpose, and meaning into their lives.

And so Paul, ever the evangelist, talks to the people about Christ, but how he does this is what we need to learn. First, Paul observed the culture. He became aware of how they were trying to fill the needs in their lives.

Second, Paul talked to them with respect. The scripture tells us that Paul acknowledged their intelligence; they were educated people. He didn't talk down to them or try to bulldoze his beliefs upon them, as those women did to Osama. He showed respect. But he also used what he had observed as an "in" to his discussion with them. He saw that they had a statue to an unknown god and so Paul tells them that he knows the unknown god that they worship. He acknowledges their other gods and explains to them how Christ does not live in temples built by hands. And that Christ is "not served by human hands, as if he is in need of anything." He goes on to say that "in Christ we live and move and have our being". He is trying to explain to them, to show them how Christ fills a need that these other gods cannot. This God that I worship, says Paul, doesn't need us, but chooses to be in relationship with us out of love, out of God's desire for us. That this God I know will fill all those lonely places within you.

Some churches I've worked with still use the word evangelism. Others have changed that word to outreach. While both convey what we are supposed to be doing, helping others to learn about and embrace the living God we worship, the thought of speaking to others about Christ, about faith, is often a scary thought for many. We were not raised to talk about our faith boldly, like Paul does here. Yet, the world, more specifically our country, is in greater need than ever for healing of that broken part within. People are spiritually lost and looking to make sense of the craziness this country now exists in, to make sense of their lives, but most of all to find meaningful connection. They have filled their lives with other gods and so we, as Christians, need to go and help those who are in need; and we do that by first listening. Listen to them to learn of their needs, of their fears, of their pain. Listening. Connection. That's always been how people

are reached. Relationship. This is how Jesus reached people, reached us, how we are to reach others.

Our job is not to tell others that they are being ridiculous in worshipping something other than God, but instead to show them how much more Jesus is able to alleviate that fear, that need. If we are able to help people sit in their brokenness and understand how the gods they have created are not really addressing those deep-seated needs, then perhaps we have the opening to share how Jesus is the God who can address all of their needs.

I think the church is dying because on some level even Christians don't believe that God can alleviate that pain within. In a Henri Nouwen devotional I have, he writes that we often complain that God doesn't talk to us, isn't there when we need God; yet Nouwen points out that it is not that God isn't talking to us, it's that we aren't listening. We aren't taking the time to sit in God's presence. The scripture says to pray without ceasing. If we are able to stay in a meditative state of mind, to be constantly checking-in, so to speak, then God can better work those miracles in our lives and work miracles through our lives.

John's gospel (14:16) also reminds us that we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is with us and in us. Our faith was never meant to be contained, never meant to be private, but to be spoken about and shared. The Holy Spirit leads the way, gives us the words, directs our paths; shows us our folly and helps us to lovingly show others their folly, as Paul does here with the Athenians. And then helps each of us find that healing within; helps us to find God.

The scriptures tell us to take the log out of our eyes so that we can help others take the twig out of their eyes. As we go through this next week, let us sit and consider what gods we might have created in our lives to fill those holes within, and then consider how we might let Christ fill those holes, so that we can then go and help others do the same, that they may know Christ as some of the Athenians came to know, as the living and loving parent God, the God who can bring us wholeness. Amen.