

### 5.17.20 Er5 Making Known the Unknown God

- In the seven-year period from 2007 to 2014, the percentage of people who identify themselves as Christians in this country dropped from 78% to 71%, and those say that they have no religious commitment rose from 16% to 23% [see [Growing Young](#) Pew Foundation Study]
- And the same time, those surveys also show that of those people who say that they are religious, that there is a vast variety of beliefs – often without any connection to an organized or institutional religion
- In this day, more and more religious people like to identify themselves as spiritual, but not practicing a religion
- So in this time when there are more people with no religious belief, and more people who are personally and independently religious, and more people describe themselves as spiritual but not religious – in this time, our society is very much like the city of Athens when the Apostle Paul visited it in our first reading for today from the Acts of the Apostles
- The Greek-speaking Romans in Athens were not unreligious unbelievers who first heard about God from Saint Paul
  - Instead, the citizens of Athens already had many gods
  - Athens was filled with many temples each dedicated to a different god
  - So the people were VERY religious, with the opportunity to choose not just one god, but they had the opportunity to choose as many gods as they wanted to worship
  - They could choose a god or gods who appealed to them, and they could also choose a god or gods who might fill their need for family, or prosperity, or health
  - And not only that, but virtually every good and patriotic citizen in the Roman Empire, which included the Athenians, honored, revered and worshiped the emperor who was believed to be descended from the gods, miraculously born, and who bore the titles of savior and deliverer
  - So when Paul went to Athens, a city with a temple on just about every street corner, each dedicated to a different god, and with a god-like ruler on the throne, he began to preach to the people by saying, “Athenians, I see

how extremely religious you are in every way. [Acts 17:22]”

- In other words, Paul began not by insulting his listeners, and not by acting like they were unreligious, but instead Paul began by meeting his listeners where they were
- They and he had something in common – they were ALL religious people, but from there he led them in a new direction
  - Apparently, the Athenians wanted to make sure that they had all their bases covered, and so that no god would be offended by leaving him or her out, they even had a temple dedicated to “An Unknown God”
  - Then starting with the idea of *An Unknown God*, Paul *made known* to them the God of Israel and Jesus Christ through his preaching
    - He told them that they all had not many, but *one God* who was the creator of all things and all people
    - Then Paul told them that this one God did not live in a building or an idol that has been made or created by humans
    - And most importantly, this God who had created everything, sent a man into the world who was raised from the death
    - Now this is where our reading for today cuts off, but listen to the reaction of Paul’s listeners in the very next verses of the story: “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers... [Acts 17:33-34]”
- Now in these days when some people believe in nothing, and many more people will believe in just about anything, this biblical story about Paul witnessing to the Athenians continues to be relevant
  - Sharing the Good News of one God revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a hard sell for people who believe in nothing
  - But for people who are vaguely religious, and for people who are spiritual, when we share about the Good

News of Jesus Christ, some will not come to faith, but some will!

- And most of the time we don't have to preach on street corners like Paul – most of the time all we have to do is share the Good News of Jesus Christ with someone through our words and actions
- Then in the hearing and the seeing, some will want to know more, and some will not, but *not even Paul brought everyone who listened to faith*
- In fact, Paul himself *brought not one a single person to faith* – because faith is the work of God's Spirit, and Paul was only the messenger, and in fact that is all we are too
- We are only called to share, and then to let God do the rest
- And here's another thing – even though we have a wonderful building in which up until some weeks ago we could gather for worship, we KNOW that God doesn't live in our church building.
- The living Christ abides with us in daily life and even beyond death – a promise and a comfort that is always Good News, especially in this time when the coronavirus raises fear and anxiety, forces isolation from all but the most necessary direct human contact, and at its worst, can inflict suffering and even death someone who is infected – during this time the God who is known to us, abides with us because Jesus lives
- So now more than ever, we have THAT Good News to share – that the God who created us, the God in Jesus Christ who died for us and was raised from the dead, and the Spirit of God that takes and uses both the witness of our words and our actions in daily life to lead some people who hear and see us to say, “We will hear again about this” ...and this will provide a way for them to move from vague belief in god, to faith in the God who has been made known in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for forgiveness, life, and hope.