

***“To an Unknown God”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 17, 2020  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Acts 17: 22-34**

Acts 17: 22-34

<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

<sup>29</sup> Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

<sup>32</sup> When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup> At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup> But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

SERMON

***Unseen Forces***

Things outside our experience are difficult, almost impossible, to grasp.

Around 6 months ago a visitor from Maine came down to Georgia.

She arrived at Christmastime,

and admired a Nativity Scene on a church lawn,

yet was quite surprised

to see firefighter helmets on the Three Wise Men.

She walked inside the church and asked a member

why they had firefighter helmets atop their crowns.  
Instead of being hospitable, however, the church member got huffy.  
*"Don't you read your Bible?"*  
She flipped open a nearby Bible and pointed.  
*"It says right here: 'Three wise men came from afar.'"*

God, whether known or unknown, is at work and play in the world today.  
God's unseen force is at work to heal and to help, to connect and commune.

### ***Unseen Forces***

In the First Century,  
the city of Athens in Greece was the center of Greco-Roman culture,  
the seat of classical culture and learning.<sup>[1]</sup>  
Almost 2,000 years ago Paul stood in the marketplace, the agora.  
There Paul delivered one of the finest sermons ever recorded.  
Paul's speech -- a classic example of rhetoric as ever -- was later set down  
so the whole people of God  
might appreciate his words, his love, his articulation of the Faith.  
He used what Aristotle defined as the perfect outline.  
Aristotle said to begin by acknowledging your audience.  
Flatter them.  
*"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way,"* said Paul. (v. 22)

Make them at ease, said Aristotle;  
show that you understand where folks are coming from.  
So Paul said, *"For as I went through the city  
and looked carefully at the objects of your worship,  
I found among them an altar with the inscription,  
'To an unknown god.'* (v. 23)

Paul guessed correctly that the people of Athens were hedging their bets,  
that just in case they left out a god from all the gods they worshipped,  
better to build an extra idol, put up an additional graven image,  
than possibly irk the temperament and power  
of some unknown god out there.

Aristotle said to marshal effective evidence and arguments.  
All this Paul does and more, with skill and grace.

*"What therefore you worship as unknown,"* he said, *"this I proclaim to you.  
The God who made the world and everything in it,  
[God] who is Lord of heaven and earth,  
does not live in shrines made by human hands,*

*nor is [God] served by human hands,  
as though [God] needed anything,  
since [God] gives to all mortals  
life and breath and all things.” (v. 25-25)*

All goes well, Paul is on a roll.

Knowing his audience loves the natural world,

Paul amplifies the forces of nature,

pointing to a divine design in the working of the world.

They are seekers, searching for divine connections with the holy and each other.

Paul preaches in the marketplace with all the fervor and passion of an evangelist

who understands their very lives are at risk.

It's never too late and it's never too early to say yes to Jesus...so, why not now?

Seekers, searchers, hoppers, dreamers, thinkers, wonderers,

what you seek is here, now, within and all around.

This might feel or seem beyond your experience, yet here it is, for you.

Know this: God, sometimes unseen & unknown, is seeing you and knowing you!

### ***Unseen Forces***

Paul testifies in the marketplace because that is where the people are

He grasps that, like him, their relationships, their conversations that matter,

their connections with each other

would be so much more meaningful

when bound together by the seemingly unseen force of love

to change who we are and how we connect with each other.

Paul takes a breath then marshals an argument for one true God.

Paul is doing great...

until he gets to the evidence of God's resurrection power,

an unseen force of love.

How do you describe the indescribable?

Point to the invisible, immortal love of Christ?

Make known to someone else

what you as plain as day

know that you know that you know that you know?

Paul the rhetorician builds to the conclusion,

which is really a beginning for the listener.

*“Since we are God's offspring,*

*we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone,*

*an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.*

*While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,*

*now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent,*

*because [the Lord] has fixed a day  
on which [God] will have the world judged in righteousness  
by a man whom [God] has appointed,  
and of this [the Lord] has given assurance to all  
by raising [Jesus Christ] from the dead.” (v. 29-31)*

Paul took them from flattery  
to acknowledging their feeble unknown god and appreciation of nature  
to testifying about the One Who Created and Creates.  
Paul points them—and us! – toward the only God they – we! -- need to know,  
the only God who knows them – us! --,  
the only God who loves, who redeems, who saves one and all.

We’re listening.  
People in the marketplace, the agora of Athens, were listening,  
taking in the words and wisdom of this preacher,  
until he started to tell them about the love of God,  
about God’s power and promise to resurrect,  
God’s will to make us like new, to create and recreate,  
to redeem and reconcile us  
to God through Jesus Christ.

Imagine Aristotle might have said “hold on, son, you’re losing them here.”  
They aren’t taking in this testimony about the unseen force of love,  
one far greater than anything we can build or manufacture or draw or imagine.

Paul’s amazing speech netted mixed reviews.  
Some mock him.  
Some deride him.  
Some walk away, having heard enough.  
Some, however, stick around, wanting to hear more.  
*“Some of them joined him and became believers,  
including Dionysius the Areopagite  
and a woman named Damaris,  
and others with them.” (v. 34)*

### ***Unseen Forces***

Let’s be grateful for those who heard and heeded the Word.  
One plus one plus one equals a million,  
which is the only way Christ’s church is built and lives are saved.

Let’s acknowledge that if the Apostle Paul confronted us today in Kroger or Trader Joe’s,  
he could point to some of the idols we worship and revere,

holding on to our possessions so tightly,  
coveting that which we don't have,  
lusting after gods made of silver and gold,  
too often forgetting we are God's children  
or neglecting God's children in our midst.

Let's be grateful that the God who created and creates also forgives:  
In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven and loved by God.

And let's not be hard on those who mocked Paul or derided him or walked away.  
The story told here in Acts 17  
does not say what became of those who mocked or derided Paul's speech.  
We do not know what happened next,  
whether they had a change of heart or mind  
or had a "come to Jesus" experience.

And let's remember that as remarkable a speech, a sermon as Paul delivered,  
his talk about this unseen force  
was beyond the comprehension of many in the marketplace.

Saul Alinsky told a tale of a community organizer  
attempting to teach his team of volunteers  
the value of staying within the experience of their people. [\[2\]](#)

Folks were not getting it.

*"Let me show you what I mean," he said.*

*"See this \$20 bill? I am going to offer it to everyone I meet, and no one will take it.*

*It's beyond their experience. Stay close by and watch."*

They went outside, staying behind but within earshot.

The teacher approached a man.

*"Here, take this \$20."*

*"What are you, some kind of nut?"* He stepped around the teacher and hurried off.

The teacher approached a woman.

*"May I give you this \$20?"*

*"I am not that kind of woman!"* she said and stepped around him.

They walked around the entire block, and no one accepted the money.

When they got back to the classroom, everyone's eyes were bright

*"We get it!"*

Things outside our experience are difficult, almost impossible, to grasp.

Know this: God's unseen force is at work to heal and to help, to connect and commune.

***Unseen Forces***

See if this sounds familiar.

A friend talked with his wife about grilling steaks that evening.  
Alexa must have been listening,  
because suddenly ads for BBQ sauce and grills popped up on his Facebook.

Have you ever surfed the Internet looking, cruising, shopping for a pair of shoes  
or a book someone recommended to you,  
and the next thing you know there are ads popping up  
on your Facebook page or via email,  
offering to sell you shoes or books?

The data of your life, your searches, likes and dislikes, posts and tweets  
are mined and sold and shared.  
I wish I was making this up, but you and I know this is all too true.  
One can easily make the argument  
that governments and companies and think tanks  
use “data mining structures and algorithms”  
to “undermine individual liberty and democratic society,  
one Facebook like and meme at a time.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Someone figured out that 45% of voters are solid for one side,  
45% are solid for the other side.  
In order to win an election all one has to do  
is target and persuade 6% of the folks in the middle,  
the undecideds, the vulnerable, the impressionable. <sup>[4]</sup>

To win an election or a key decision or dominate market share,  
one only needs to persuade 6% to swing to your side.

Using data mined from Facebook and other social media,  
ads, articles, announcements are crafted with intent to win hearts and minds.

In 2016 in the USA and Great Britain,  
voters were hammered with waves of information,  
info often false, misleading, slanted,  
to persuade and sway people’s opinion.

Some folks were encouraged to vote a certain way,  
while others were discouraged from voting at all, encouraged to stay home.  
This happened in 2016, but it did not cease.

This is no flash-in-the-pan idea.

“The systems social media enabled...  
to influence democratic elections  
constitute "weapons grade" technology.”<sup>[5]</sup>

And, my friends, it works.

Invisible, scentless, an unseen force used unjustly  
daily impacts our lives and communities.

Far from harmless,

“...it’s hard to control a weapon you can’t see...  
the normally invisible data of our everyday lives...  
is harvested and weaponized against us.”<sup>[6]</sup>

A lifelong member of one political party told me in 2016  
that he voted for the candidate of the other party.

“*What changed your mind?*” I asked.

“*What I read on Facebook,*” he said.

He was not alone.

Far from it.

Not only is our democracy at risk, threatened, under attack,  
our relationships, our conversations that matter, our connections with each other  
are threatened by those who use unseen forces  
to change who we are and how we connect with each other.

The Church of Jesus Christ,

hearing this message, proclaiming this Word of truth,  
seeing the threat and declaring it real,

has a moral responsibility

to stand up in the marketplace, in the agora  
of Athens and Decatur and every hamlet and city square  
to proclaim a call for transparency,  
for openness, for noninterference,  
for honesty and integrity.

The Church is called to point people to the invisible, immortal love of God in Christ.

The Church – standing foursquare in the arena of the world –  
may be the only evidence our neighbors witness  
that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Whether we are bearing witness here in the sanctuary,  
live streaming on Facebook and YouTube,  
or in the marketplace, we are evidence of a known God!

Let’s be and share the Faith the world is seeking.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

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<sup>[1]</sup> Portions of today's exegesis are gleaned with gratitude from William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 27, No. 2. Year A. April, May, June 1999. Pp. 27-29.

<sup>[2]</sup> Saul Alinsky, Rules for Radicals, 1971.

<sup>[3]</sup> "Netflix's *The Great Hack* Brings Our Data Nightmare to Life" By: Emily Dreyfuss, Culture, 24 July 2019.

<sup>[4]</sup> Dreyfuss. Ibid. The [documentary] film "The Great Hack" "...begins as news is breaking that Cambridge Analytica unethically scraped data from millions of Facebook users and used [the data] to target vulnerable and impressionable voters in an effort to elect Trump and pass the Brexit resolution."

<sup>[5]</sup> Dreyfuss. Ibid.

<sup>[6]</sup> Dreyfuss. Ibid.