

# “The Unknown God”

Acts 17:16-31

Christ is risen!! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia!!

In our text today, St. Paul stood up in the Areopagus in Athens, Greece, the place where philosophers would gather to talk. And Paul mentions that as he had been walking around looking at all of the gold, silver, and stone idols, he noticed that there was an altar with the inscription: “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.”

I suppose the people of Athens wanted to cover all of their bases just in case they had overlooked a god or goddess. They had their entire pantheon of gods, Zeus and all the others, but just in case, they wanted to appease any potential unknown god.

When listening to the way in which the world today speaks about God, it would be appropriate to put that same inscription on the vast majority of what are sold as “religious books” and 99% of what you find on the Internet: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. We need to be able to say more about God than just “God is love” or “all you need is Jesus” or some other vague description without really knowing what that means.

Where does God become known to us? First of all, God is revealed

through His Word and Sacraments. Luther says, “[We] must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.” This is where we come to know and begin to understand our Lord and Savior – the spoken Word and the Word joined with the elements.

The reality that He has forgiven us; the reality of His saving work and how He has saved us is only revealed in His Word. Not only do we need a deeper understanding of this for our personal well-being, but as St. Peter says in our Epistle lesson, we need to “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” How do we become prepared to give an answer? By reading or hearing God’s Word on a regular basis; studying; brushing the dust off the catechism and, making sure that the height of your understanding, your theological zenith, making sure that did not happen while in Confirmation class.

All of us have friends and family members who are outside of the kingdom of God. Think about one of them. What would you say to that person if he or she asked you to tell them about God? Would your answer be describing the Living, Triune God put forth in Holy Scripture, or would your words be more descriptive of an Unknown god?

When we go to Camp CILCA for our Confirmation Retreat, the highlight of that weekend is playing Romans vs. Christians. The Pastors are Roman soldiers who arrest the Christians, a couple of whom have planted a church

somewhere at the camp, and they are trying to spread the word of where the church is so that others can find it.

When we arrest them, they are supposed to bear witness of their faith and “convert” the Romans by sharing the Gospel. There have been a couple of years where they did a good job, but the central theme of the Gospel tends to be missing from their initial presentation of the Gospel – the necessity of Christ’s sacrifice to pay the ransom price for the guilt of our sin and the resurrection of the body.

The kids tend to get caught up in arguments about Creation and the hope of the Gospel tends to be simply about the joy of heaven. I don’t want to hear any complaints from past students, yes, some did much better than others. However, these are the concepts which they tend to start with. We then try and guide the conversation in more helpful directions. And most every year, by the end, the Gospel has been proclaimed and the Romans become Christians.

The point is that, in your daily conversations, those who are outside of the faith, or are critical of the teachings of the church, or those who are struggling with their faith, they are not going to be the ones who will guide the conversation in the direction of the Gospel. You need to be prepared to do that. Otherwise, you will just be talking about AN UNKNOWN GOD.

Would you be able to say more than “God is love,” or “Jesus loves you and forgives those who believe in Him”? Both of which are very important statements, but are rather vague and relatively meaningless to someone

who does not know who Jesus truly is.

Paul stands among the philosophers of Athens and what is his message? He was “preaching Jesus and the resurrection.” When you are standing among those for whom Jesus and the resurrection are “unknown”, that is the time to talk about Jesus and the resurrection. That is where we start. That is where we finish.

Listen to the words of Peter carefully, “always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect . . . so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”

In other words, conduct your life in such a way that those who are outside of Christ recognize that you are different. Then, when they ask you for the reason you have the hope that is in you, you don’t need clever words. Tell them about Jesus and the resurrection.

It is not about having a clever, well-crafted argument to convince them of the truth. With our rational thought, with our minds, with our intellect and our reason, God is unknown. It is only through child-like faith that we can approach the One, True God.

As Christ says in our Gospel lesson: The world cannot receive Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. For so many friends and loved ones, He is an Unknown God. Make Him known, so that they share the reason for the hope that is in you and proclaim with you “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.