



**“Knowing God”**  
Pastor Andy CastroLang  
May 21, 2017

**Scripture (NRSV):**

***Acts 17:22-31***

<sup>22</sup> Paul stood up in the middle of the council on Mars Hill and said, “People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. <sup>23</sup> As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown God.’ What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples made with human hands. <sup>25</sup> Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn’t far away from any of us. <sup>28</sup> In God we live, and move, and have our being. (*Seneca, Epimenides*) As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’ (*Aratus*)

<sup>29</sup> “Therefore, as God’s offspring, we have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought. <sup>30</sup> God overlooks ignorance of these things in times past, but now directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives. <sup>31</sup> This is because God has set a day when he intends to judge the world justly by a man he has appointed. God has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

<sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some began to ridicule Paul. However, others said, “We’ll hear from you about this again.” <sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the council. <sup>34</sup> Some people joined him and came to believe, including Dionysius, a member of the council on Mars Hill, a woman named Damaris, and several others.

## Sermon:

There is a disparaging phrase going around these days. It is impolite but I thought of it right away when I read this passage.

It is “mansplaining”. Have you heard of it?

It is a made up word that is used to identify a particular kind of odious behavior seen among certain men.

It is the patronizing, sometimes overbearing attitude of a man when speaking to a woman, or any person they think their inferior.

It is the hubris and arrogance of explaining to someone, something they already know!

It is explaining computer code to a woman who writes code.

It is explaining the developmental stages of a child to a woman who works with children.

It is annoying as hell.

And at first, I thought I heard Paul doing much the same thing among the Athenians.

Paul is in Athens, what we might call a “university town” in our own day: full, chock full of people of great learning and sophistication. Maybe a Berkeley of the ancient world.

And he is standing before a “council” our translation says, but it is a council of philosophers, intellectuals, great minds. As you read along you wonder, are the Athenian philosophers going to be insulted by Paul? Is he “mansplaining”?

Everything Paul does in Acts, and in his letters, is centered around sharing the story of God in Jesus Christ. He has one drum he bangs, all the time.

Jesus has shown us God, and God has shown us his will, his design for relationship and communion, by showing us Jesus; through his life, death and resurrection.

But Paul, for all his urgency to share the message of God in Jesus...is not a fool.

So, as he stands among the men of great learning (and maybe there were a few women there, too?) he carefully, carefully, constructs his argument.

He complements the Athenians on their religiosity...

He sees their hunger and their searching for the Holy, the Mysterious Other to whom they will give their devotion, the Athenians have even consecrated an altar to “the unknown god.”

Then he tries to answer their intellectual inquiry and their hunger with his proclamation of God, Lord of Heaven and Earth. There is much in these verses, 24-28, that is already familiar to the Athenians, many of whom worship Zeus as their Father, and Paul quotes Aratus the Greek philosopher and poet who sang of Zeus, “we, too, are his offspring.”

Showing that he is no ignorant hick from some backwater he also quotes Seneca the Roman philosopher, and Epimenides the Greek philosopher, from whom comes the quote, “In him we live and move and have our being”.

Paul gives a name and a face to the One in whom we live and move and have our being, and it is NOT Zeus. Paul shares with them the God of Abraham and Sarah, of the slaves under pharaoh, the God of the prophets and poets of Judaism, the God of Jesus.

Paul is ever inspired, ever uplifted, ever eager to share the story of Jesus, and of God at work in the world, changing the world through Jesus.

Changing the world for the better, radically changing the world for the better. Changing the world so that the outcasts no longer are rejected, the poor no longer are poor, the sick and the despairing and even the dead, are no longer left to sickness, poverty, despair and death! Jesus is changing all of that.

And Jesus is calling all of us to the new world of God’s design, of life, life in its fullness.

And so, Paul insists that the time has come for people to “change their hearts and lives” (*repent*, in the NRSV). To enter into the new world of God’s imagining, that Jesus called “the kingdom of God”. In the words of Jesus, “thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.”

Paul never fails to remind people to prepare for God’s judgment of the world by the one God has chosen; Jesus, the Christ. A judgment that will ask us what we have done with the precious gift of our lives, one another, this planet.

He never believed that the world was simply the playground of the gods, or a ball spinning through space without purpose or design.

Paul, first as a devout Jew, then as a follower of Jesus and his Way, believes the world is the treasure of God, and we are the children of God.

How we respond to these truths matters.

For if our heavenly parent cares about the least and the lost, if the Creator of all things cares about the creation...then we ought to as well. We should reflect the love of the One who made us in Love, shouldn’t we?

But whether it was ancient Athens, or it is downtown Spokane...we can see that the world is deeply shadowed by violence and destruction, often overwhelmed with disrespect and selfishness, callous disregard and despair. Love struggles to be manifest! God’s judgment will be on the way we manifest love.

Is the message of Jesus not as important and urgent today as it was in ancient Athens?

Is the message of Jesus who calls us to follow his Way, and to change our hearts and lives, still urgent in you?

I feel a sense of urgency, and also the power to act...because I follow the Jesus way. Together, we can speak to power, we can work to heal people's lives, and care for this planet, our home...because of the power of Jesus in our lives.

I share love and laughter, hope and joy...because of the power of Jesus in my life. I face fear and push back against aimlessness and despair...because of the power of Jesus in my life.

And I hope I can do it without "mansplaining", patronizing or dismissing others. Certainly, I try to share Jesus without violence, whether spiritual, emotional or physical.

I try to share how the Jesus way is worth their attention, and a way of joy and hope and peace. It is my way to come closer to the holy One, to God, who is ever new and beautiful and awesome.

I try to show that following Jesus helps me know God, and love God, and let my life rest in God. Through Jesus, I learn to trust in God.

You each have your own path, opportunity, opening. We all do. We all receive the invitation to come to know God.

Our story today ends with some Athenians scoffing at Paul.

And some wanting to talk again.

And some choosing to join Paul in living the way of Jesus.

We may not be as eloquent as Paul, certainly, I don't travel as much as Paul!

But we can share our own story of following Jesus, and why we choose to follow.

In the words of St. Francis of Assisi, "share the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words."

Live a life that shines with love and compassion, with care and with mercy. With justice and with joy.

And you, like Paul, will be telling the story of God as you go through your day!

May we be so bold! May we be so loving.

Alleluia, Amen!