

## How do we speak of God? Part 2 - Idols and Unknowns - July 26, 2009

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*Scripture Text: Acts 17:16-23*

Think with me for a moment. I want us to consider how and where we fit into this story about Paul's visit to Athens.

This is an interesting and often enlightening exercise I like to engage in when I approach a text that has a number of varied characters.

The story starts with Paul ... so shall we. Paul arrives in Athens and is appalled by the prolific, popular practice of worshiping many Gods, using idols to represent them. He immediately gets to work informing people of the errors of their ways – in the synagogue, marketplace, and probably anywhere else he can find an audience. He looks carefully at their objects of worship, seeking to find ways to connect them with the good news of Jesus.

Faced with a culture and society full of idols, do we respond like Paul? Are we outraged and stirred to action? Do we share our understandings of another way of living and believing <pause>

Maybe we connect with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks of the synagogue. They're fairly easy to gloss over in this passage.

It's probably safe to say that this is a group that was not involved in the idol worship of the popular culture. And while Paul is often seen as the apostle to the gentiles, he did come from a well-trained Jewish background.

In reasoning with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks he probably would have asked them what they thought or were doing about all these idols, even as he preached to them about Jesus. Given the extremely strong attachment to monotheism, believing there is only one true God, they would have likely been just as uncomfortable as Paul with all the idolatry, even though they don't seem as motivated to do anything about it.

Are we like the Jews and God-fearing Greeks? Surrounded and tempted by idols every day. Maybe offended, but ultimately complacent?

Or maybe we're like the people of the marketplace. Active participants in the system Paul decries. Such practices were the common belief of that time and place, the religious norm for generations.

They worshiped their different Gods, each with particular attributes and realms of influence. Yet even the multi-faceted practice of polytheism didn't cover everything. There remained some unknown element, some shortcoming or yet-to-be discovered aspect of life and faith. Surely there was some unknown God for that too.

Do we also blindly fall into the religious patterns and norms of our day and age? Do we take up the latest spiritual fads and look strangely upon those who might suggest something different? <pause>

Lastly, maybe we're like the learned scholars of the Areopagus – interested in Paul's message out of purely intellectual curiosity.

They didn't ask him to share his story with them because they might convert to his strange new beliefs, but rather because they were strange and new. For the novelty of being exposed to something new and different, something to spur their philosophical conversations, to examine and dissect.

Is our interest in the sometimes strange and radical story of Jesus, the Messenger, Anointed One, and embodiment of God, primarily intellectual? Do we care more for thinking about faith and belief than actually living them out? Have we come to idolize our pursuit of new theologies and ways of thinking? <pause>

Please don't try to fit yourself into one of these characterizations just because you think it's the "right" one. Honestly, I'm not sure there really is a correct or best answer. In many ways I see myself in all these. And maybe that's the real value of this thought exercise – to connect more deeply with the story through its characters.

That's one of the reasons I enjoy exploring the book of Acts. As the story of the earliest adventures of what would later become the church, we can discover many ways we might fit into the narrative. Sometimes we're the Jesus followers – but sometimes we're those who need to encounter the message anew.

We all can get caught up in the attractive allure of idols. A traditional understanding of an idol is that it is something we worship in place of God or in this ancient scenario, in place of a god or gods.

This understandings of idols leads us to recognize the physical things we worship instead of our God – fancy cars or other possessions, wealth in general, experiences and personal pleasure, or outward appearances. Our culture gives us many, many alternative altars to worship at.

But idols weren't meant to be worshiped instead of gods per-se, but to represent them. This nuance is important, because it has bearing on our own religious expressions, on how we speak of and conceive God.

Peter Rollins, a scholar and post-modern Christian author from Northern Ireland, defines idolatry as "any attempt that would render the essence of God as accessible, bringing God into aesthetic visibility or conceptual visibility."

It is the attempt to reduce God to a physical object *or* an intellectual object. He refers to the latter as conceptual idolatry. What makes these things idols is not what they *are* inherently, whether a statue or a particular theological understanding, but rather it is *how* we engage with them that makes them idols.

These physical and intellectual objects become idols when they completely remove the unknown.

Personally, I think most of us do a pretty good job of recognizing physical idols – temptations to replace the one Living God with possessions and stuff that is much more accessible, less mysterious, much more finite.

However, I think many of us modern Christians fall far too easily into conceptual idolatry. We love and worship gods of our own creation. Whether we're talking about the ways we name, imagine, or conceptualize God, or even particular ways of living out our faith in practice, all these can quickly become idols when we believe they can get at the very essence of God.

This kind of idolatry takes place all around us, not only in our culture but in the church as well.

I heard something at district conference Friday night that connects with this. In his live, internet video talk with us, new moderator of our denomination Shawn Flory-Replogle asked this: whether we love the church enough to allow it to change in order to follow God's vision for us.

This is a profound statement that, to me, speaks of how we often make our ways of being the church into idols that would inhibit us from doing the work of Christ. It speaks to how we can believe that a particular way of embodying the faith is to be preserved or promoted so strongly that we cannot conceive of God working in other ways.

In the midst of all our attempts to concretize who, what, and how we worship, have we left space for the mystery and workings of an unknown God?

If not, we might be in a worse place than the Athenians. After all, at least their belief in an unknown God gave Paul a place to connect them with the gospel!

Herein lies one of the great complexities of our faith in the one, Living God. We believe that God *is* made known to us in many ways, foremost through Jesus. Yet we also claim God is beyond knowing. Both halves of this paradox are necessary for our faith.

We cannot idolize what we believe we know and understand at the expense of the unknown, yet we also can't reject the possibility of knowing God through Christ and the continuing work of the Spirit.

Our Christian history, with all its emphasis on orthodoxy and right belief, often works against these things. When we codify our beliefs in creeds and doctrines that are understood to be inerrant and immovable, when we say being a follower of Jesus must mean x, y, and z, we skew the balance between known and unknown.

We need to seek out a middle way, between the idols and unknowns, a way that recognizes the lure of each while also recognizing that the truth lies somewhere in between – in that paradox of a God made known but still beyond our knowing.

Maybe we need more emphasis on orthodoxy as believing in the right way instead of believing the right, codified beliefs. Returning to Peter Rollins, he sees this kind of faith as a way of being in the world rather than a means for believing things about the world.

But what might that right way look like? When it comes to this particular paradox, I suggest that we begin to treat our idols more like icons, which have long been a powerful spiritual element of Eastern Christian traditions.

I find it a shame that for most people in our western society the word “icon” has been reduced from a rich, religious meaning to a small, colorful logo you click on to launch programs on your computer.

Where idols are meant to represent the very essence of God, icons are intended to be aids to our contemplation of something far beyond particular words, images, or experiences.

Icons make use of the known to consider the unknown. They represent some small way we have found

to come in contact with God, and in turn for God to come in contact with us.

While traditionally icons have been physical – paintings artwork, and so on, just as we can make our beliefs, understandings, and practice into idols, we can also treat them as icons.

As icons we can recognize that these things have arisen from authentic encounters with the divine and are meant to be tools for us to use for that purpose. Yet when those tools no longer work, there comes a time when we must discover and create new icons from our *own* encounters with God.

Static, codified idols don't allow for this. Icons do. Icons recognize the paradox of the known and the unknown and allow us to faithfully live into that tension.

What might it look like for us to hold our beliefs, understandings, and practices as icons instead of idols? As pathways of connecting with some portion of the Divine, rather than attempts to capture the essence of God?

How might this way of believing change the way we live out our faith?

During our time of response this morning, I invite you to contemplate and respond to the many questions I've raised. How do you find yourself connecting with this idea? Where does it make you uncomfortable? What are some of the conceptual idols you've witnessed or participated in that might better be approached as icons?

As we respond in silence and in word, anyone is invited to speak from wherever the Spirit is resonating within you.