

What Are We Saying Yes To?
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21
6th Sunday of Easter
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“I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” These were the first words of the Apostle Paul’s sermon to the people of Athens. It was a tough crowd. They loved to hear and discuss new ideas. They loved to argue and debate about politics and religion, about truth and beauty and goodness. There were lots of shrines to lots of gods around, and as far as the Athenians were concerned, all of them served their purposes. But there was one shrine in Athens which Paul saw, and this gave him his “hook” for his sermon (preachers are always looking for a hook). This shrine said, “to the unknown god.” It seems the Athenians wanted to cover all their bases.

Paul said in his sermon that he was there to tell them who this unknown god was, and he proceeded to do so. He said that this is the God who made the world and everything in it. This God, he said, doesn’t live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him. This God made the entire human race, gave them a hospitable world to live in, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God. We don’t need to grope in the dark after him. God isn’t remote, but is near. In fact, Paul preached, we can’t get away from him. So it doesn’t make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for us.

You can imagine that those gathered to hear Paul’s sermon there in Athens might find it moderately interesting to this point, and not too different from ideas they may have had heard before. But he continues by saying that now that the unknown God is known he is calling for a radical life-change. A day has been set by God when the entire human race will be judged and everything will be set right. He has already appointed the judge,

confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead.

This is where he lost them. Some of them laughed and walked off making jokes. Others said, “We’ll talk more about this later.” A few were convinced and went with him, but not many. Athens, it is interesting to note, is the only place Paul preached where he did not start a church.

In these days some in what might be called the “established” Christian community – that is, churches and denominations with history, traditions, rituals, buildings – occasionally scoff at what sometimes seems the rootlessness or fuzziness of many forms of the religious search today. Many more people than belong to churches or synagogues would say they are “religious,” or (more likely) “spiritual” people. Of these, many do not see or feel the need for connection to a church. Many others have found such connections to be less than fulfilling, for a variety of reasons – or they don’t feel there is a place for them in such places or groups of people.

Paul doesn’t condemn the Athenians, as he does, say, the Romans, whom he claims in that letter to be “without excuse.” He finds plenty of excuses for the Athenians. He has plenty of room in his heart for those who seek God. Apparently God does too.

There is much seeking after God going on today, the God who remains unknown to so many. And yes, we know there are lots of shrines and idols around – the things, the pursuits that claim our allegiance and devotion, our time and energies – that are less than God, and yet seek to fill a place in us that only God can rightfully and blessedly occupy. But they cannot succeed in doing that, because still there is, in Paul’s words, the “groping in the dark” for the God who is not captured by idols of concrete or steel, of money or technology, nor our best ideas or most imaginative creativity – even by the most important shrine of all, the shrine to the god of choice itself – the god of “keeping your options open.”

I remember my Mom would sometimes say to me, when I was a young man who

wanted very much to keep my options open, that she didn't think I would be happy until I got married. I really resented that, because I did not believe that happiness could be found in only one way, and I would tell her so. But in hindsight I don't really think she meant that happiness can be found only in this way. She was talking about me, and because she loved me she wanted me to find someone/something that I could give my heart to, give my life to – to say “yes” to. I was doing a good bit of “floating” back then, not attaching to much of anything – and though I had a general sense of direction (I was in seminary at the time), I just didn't know and wasn't feeling compelled to any particular way. Around this time I remember one of my seminary professors saying, when discussing the topic of freedom one day in class - “floating in a sea of infinite possibilities is just that, floating.” Our freedom, our liberation can only be realized in saying “yes” to something, in religious terms, more specifically in Christian terms, by saying yes, by giving ourselves to God through Christ.

In his sermon to the Athenians Paul was saying that the god whom they called “unknown” was more than an interesting idea. He is known, not because he has been found, but because in God's freedom God has chosen to be revealed, has chosen to show a path. This God has shown himself, given himself. The God who created all things and gifted the world with the beauty of the natural order and placed upon it the rich diversity of peoples and cultures, has come close to us, as close to us as we are to ourselves. To acknowledge this God, and to give ourselves to this God, is to find life.

It is easy to scoff at the “spiritual but not religious” crowd. I've done some of that myself. But the question that challenges me/us in today's text is, do we, as the church of Jesus Christ, have room in our hearts for those who seek God? But before we answer too quickly that “of course we do” we need to ask what it is that we meet them with, those who seek God? You see, there are a lot of gods crowding our lives today – a whole “pantheon”

of them. What are gods? They are those things that demand our subservience, our loyalty, our devotion, our energies, and these days especially our time. That's the practical definition, anyway. But as with the Athenians, so we today, in our diverse, complicated world, that doesn't quite cover it. None of these lesser gods can truly claim our heart. And so they had a shrine to the "unknown god." That was ingenious of them. Paul certainly admired them for it. It said that there was more to seek after than can be found by human searching, more light to be shed in a dark and often frightening world than we can muster, more mystery to human life than we can explain or explain away. There is a basic restlessness in the human heart, St. Augustine said, and restless we'll remain until our rest is found in God. Centuries later, Pascal described an "infinite abyss" within the soul of every person, reserved for God alone.

But even as we instinctively long for God, since we are created by God in God's own image, still there is something in us that wants to preserve the restlessness, something that resists coming down with our full weight into the way, the truth and the life. And so to those who would come seeking after God we may well say, "give that unknown god any name you want and we'll bless it, because at least we can see that you are seeking! That's the important thing! Float away!" And they do – away from a community rooted in the risen Christ, whose resurrection presence brings life that is full and abundant and free.

The Apostle Paul did not merely affirm the Athenians in their spiritual quest. He didn't simply add Jesus to the myriad of gods and goddesses. He introduced Jesus as the one before whom the entire world must give account, and by virtue of his being raised from the dead, he is the one who determines the standards of righteousness by which the world will be judged – the greatest of which is love (gospel reading). As one commentator on this text has written, "There comes a point when the Christian witness must speak of Christ's resurrection and its consequences and take the risk of being switched off by the

partner in dialogue.” It is no surprise that when Paul reached this point in his sermon, many laughed, while others suspected he might be right.

We don't see a lot of actual worship around golden altars these days, but we do know about divided loyalties, and the many gods crowding the lives of folks these days. In the midst of it all, the claims of Jesus are as disruptive for us as they were for those Athenians. How do we fit his claims into a world already crowded by so many gods? The pressure is to say yes to everything, in a world where tolerance is hailed as the cardinal virtue, and spirituality is defined as self-fulfillment, and religion takes its place alongside other leisure activities. We'll pursue the higher life, as long as time allows.

But what do we ultimately say “yes” to? Jesus told us that the only way we could understand who we are (not a bad definition of happiness) is to cast our gaze on the relationship with him, and with him alone – the one who claims us for God in love. Are we open enough, are we free enough, to offer this spiritual food to a hungry world?

To the glory of God, Amen.