

Easter 6A: Acts 17.22-31

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Who knows how many false gods I unwittingly serve. But a demon who haunts me daily is the one who says, "You might be able to use that someday. Better hang onto it just in case." If you'd seen my father's garage back in Arkansas, you'd realize genetics are probably involved as well. But, even if there's never been a mateless sock in your dresser drawer, and even if you don't currently have \$38 in dimes and smaller change in the console of your car, are there ways that you make too much allowance in your life for the "just in case?"

This is what first comes to my mind when I read about the Altar to an Unknown God that caught Paul's attention one day in the Areopagus. The Athenians clearly knew about making provision for the "just in in case," At least with regard to religion.

The impulse isn't all bad. At least I hope it's not. There's something a little ecumenical, even humble, about including an altar in your holy place to a god you don't yet know. I've long admired the way Orthodox Jews use a dash in place of the "o" when they write the word "God" to remind themselves of that word's inadequacy. We should all have ways of remembering that none of us knows entirely what we're talking about when we talk about God.

But that's not the same as saying there are no wrong ways to talk about God, or that there are no damaging, even blasphemous concepts of the divine. In Acts chapter 17, I'd say Paul is pretty nimble as he navigates the space between "just in case" theology and the truth that some ways of talking about God are just wrong. Please note that "nimble" is not the adjective I would choose for some of Paul's other theological arguments. But let's take another look at what he's up to today.

I do wish the lectionary backed up one verse and began with this line: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new." Unfortunately, this is only more confirmation that the Athenians were my kind of people. Not only were they "just-in-case" folk, they were philosophizers who liked to speculate about why things are. They were probably all caught up on the latest podcasts. Wanted to be in the know with regard to the hippest intellectual trends and ideas. They would have loved seminary.

I think this context matters. Because I wonder if what Paul thought was actually worth making a scene about was not that the Athenians didn't believe in the resurrection or that they hadn't inscribed the name Yahweh or Jesus onto that altar to the god they didn't yet know. It's that you just can't come to the living God as one more idle curiosity in your life. And you can't come to the living God to hedge your bets. Following Jesus ... living as if all humanity are children of the very same God ... these just can't be matters we dabble in. Because what you really believe about the nature of God or the gods or the universe will matter to every aspect of your life.

Part of what Paul was pointing out is the way "just in case" theology can really clutter up your religious garage. The gods we think we might have a use for someday tend to be small, with very specific skill sets. This one might help you have a child and that one might grant you

success in business. They also tend to be local gods. You know, different gods for Germantown and West Memphis and Jackson. They definitely worship some strange and very foreign gods over there in Nashville. Having lots of gods tended to separate humans into lots of separate stories.

So Paul steps through the theological door the Athenians left open with that altar to an unknown god, and says he doesn't just want to add one more divinity to their collection. Paul says this: "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, 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."

Think about what's being disrupted here. Paul was standing in a place where people made offerings to all the gods they could think of, in hopes of pleasing them so that their lives would go better. All the gods they could think of plus one, just for good measure! These gods were powerful enough that we know we need to make them happy. But they were also fickle and petty and hungry. The power humans wielded was that these gods needed things from us. Better offer some grain to this one and wine to that one and I hear the tall one over there likes the smell of incense. It wasn't so much that there were too many gods in the Areopagus. It's that they were all so needy and so small. They had nothing to do with the nature of the one God of everything that is.

God does not live in our shrines. God doesn't need our service either. Paul says that. God does not need your service! Because God is the one who gives life, not the one who demands it. God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. All of us. Each precious created thing that ever was. Every creature. Every stone. Every atom. These are real because they are given. And they are given, because that's who God is. God gives. God gives life. Always.

Can you feel the vast, vast difference between these two visions of the divine?

Rowan Williams sometimes talks about "toxic religion." One of the tests he proposes takes the form of this question: "Is this a practice, a way of living, a way of talking [about God], whose cumulative effect is to make people feel less? Or is it a way that allows them to expand into a space?"

This does seem close to the heart of Paul's critique. The question is not whether you got the name of God or the number of gods correct. Who are your gods? And, more specifically, do they make your life smaller, as you scramble to please them? Do they make you afraid and defensive? Do they make you want to hunker down with your own people, just in case? Or is God the One who keeps expanding you? Keeps widening your vision, including more and more of what you experience, enveloping more and more of even people you once thought were beyond redemption or repair?

It sounds expansive to have an altar to an unknown god, but not if that god behaves just like the rest of them. Paul says that the giver of all life and of all that is, the one living God of all of us, isn't anything like any the small and petty gods I think we still too often serve. The small and petty God I even believe still gets preached about in Jesus's name too often today.

When we look around our world, we see the terrifying results of a distorted concept of God. When we hear rhetoric that demeans and diminishes whole groups of people, as though they matter less to God, so they can matter less to us, this is toxic religion in the public square. When political power is seized, not because people care, but because they can ... when the name of Jesus is used to justify indiscriminate violence and war, a dangerous distortion of the

nature of reality, arising from a distorted image of God, is playing out. These are the ways of the small, hungry gods of the Areopagus. Not the ways of the expansive One in whom all of humanity lives, the One in whom all creatures breathe, the One from whom everything that is receives its being.

You may not think of yourself as a philosopher or a theologian. But each of us lives according to how we believe this universe is put together. And if you wonder what someone really believes, don't count how many times they drop the name of Jesus into a conversation or how much they say they love the Lord. Look at their life. Look at your life. Is it constricting? Consolidating what you possess and what you control? Are only the number of enemies in your life expanding? That's toxic faith, my friend. And a formula for a small and toxic life.

Or does your encounter with God open parts of yourself that used to shrink back in fear and shame? Does your search for God expand what it means to be alive in this world and expand how wide and broad and deep you ever imagined the mercy of God could be? Does the world itself feel more like the gift of a Creator whose nature is always to give life and give it abundantly, needing nothing at all in return? This is what's available in the way of Jesus. This is the life Paul refused to pretend his Athenian friends were living as they made their anxious sacrifices to all those smaller gods, just in case.

Hear the good news, friends. It is as expansive and as urgently needed today as it ever was, because our idols are just as many and just as small as they ever were. Another way of being alive really is still on offer, even to us. You see, "There's a wideness to God's mercy," as the old hymn promises, "like the wideness of the sea." Surely the life we're called to, as offspring of the One who gives life and breath to us and to all things, is to deepen our trust in the God Paul pointed to one day in Athens, so that, for the rest of our days, our lives and our loves might grow wider and wider and wider as well.