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St. Paul's Lutheran Church

2100 16<sup>th</sup> Street SW

Austin, MN 55912-1749

Pastor Ted Barthels

Sermon preached on

May 14, 2023

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter

(Previously preached on May 17, 2020)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Peter 3:15-22; John 14:15-21

Hymns: 224; 246; 17; 644

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; <sup>23</sup> for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: <sup>24</sup> God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. <sup>25</sup> Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. <sup>26</sup> And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, <sup>27</sup> so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; <sup>28</sup> for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' <sup>29</sup> Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. <sup>30</sup> Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has

given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”  
(NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.  
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior, dear fellow  
Redeemed:

INTRO: Not knowing what you don't know!

A great spiritual problem in this world because of sin is spiritual ignorance. Sin alienates us from God so that we are completely estranged from Him, and do not know the true God. Paul in our text explains that the Lord directs the course of this world, the course of human events so that there is what we refer to as a natural knowledge of God. In our text Paul describes this state of mind and heart as a groping for God in the chance of finding Him, even though the Lord is not far from anyone of us. Without the Lord there is no life. Without the Lord the universe would fall apart. The evidence of His presence and power is all around us. Yet natural man gropes for Him as if in darkness, searching, but not finding the Lord. People by nature know there is a god, though they are incapable of discovering the one true God apart from God revealing Himself to us in His Son.

On this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter, we are led by the Spirit to comprehend that God reveals Himself to us through Jesus whom He raised from the dead. Jesus who died for us and rose again reveals to the world the only true God, the God of our salvation. Let us take to heart the lesson Paul presented in the Areopagus, the court of knowledge in Athens, regarding the importance of --

**THEME: Knowing the Unknown God.**

Paul addresses the enigma of --

### **I. Seeking the Unknown God.**

Paul began with an observation that his audience would find agreeable. He observed that they were very religious. Greek culture was known for its philosophy and wisdom, but when it came to theology, they worshiped the many gods of Greek mythology. They had many temples and many altars to a variety of mythical gods, and yet they also had that altar to the Unknown God! With all their wisdom that couldn't get past knowing that they didn't know! This is how the Lord would have it, that man might hear and believe the gospel, for "*this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*" (John 17:3)

What captured Paul's attention was that they added an altar and a peculiar inscription, "to the Unknown God." Paul declared that was the God he would present to them.

That would certainly capture their attention. We are told that even though Athens was not the center of power it used to be, it was still a great city that was renowned for its pursuit of knowledge and philosophy and the investigation of new ideas. Paul had captured their attention and had the opportunity to then present to them the true God. There is one God who is the Creator of all things. It's only reasonable then to understand that if God made all things, He Himself is not made of some material substance like silver or gold, fashioned by men. The true God is far above all things material and earthly. He is not a statue or image that one can see, and before which one bows down.

The Prophet Jeremiah wrote of God, "*God has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, And has stretched out the heavens at His discretion.*" (Jeremiah 10:12) Paul wrote of this in his epistle to the Corinthians: "*In the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.*" (1 Corinthians 1:21) and again, "*'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.'*"<sup>10</sup> But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

From the moment of Adam's fall into sin man has proceeded with the arrogant notion that we know better than God. Adam and Eve saw that it was desirable to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree that they might obtain wisdom. How wrong they were! And it has been the same down to our own generation. Man exalts his own wisdom, his own ideas and values, as superior to God and regards the message of God in Christ as foolishness.

And so man keeps groping in darkness. Even yet today our own society exalts the wonders of eastern mysticism with its many false manmade gods of Hinduism and Buddhism, and whatever else comes down the pike, and yet our society spurns the gospel of a crucified and risen Jesus as being silly, foolish, impossible, even ghoulish.

But many millions of people are so sincere in their beliefs in these other religions of the world! Sincerity in believing malarkey doesn't make it any less malarkey. In our own American culture these ideas of eastern mysticism come to Christians cloaked as transcendental meditation, or good karma, or as social justice or the good old fashioned golden rule, all presented as legitimate ways of securing favor with God that leads to eternal salvation.

The general response of most in the crowd listening to Paul in Athens is replicated in our society today. Some mocked, others said, as they turned away, we will hear you another day. (Acts 17:32) There is little sense of urgency associated with hearing the message of a crucified and resurrected Savior, that one thing needful!

Idolatry confuses the creature with the Creator. And that is as true today as it was when Paul preached in Athens.

The Lord put up with that ignorance of unbelief as He directed the course of human events to that central event of history, the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ for our redemption and justification. Now –

## **II. God Calls ALL to Repent.**

Paul was direct in his testimony. Judgment is coming. *“He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.”* (v.31)

The time leading up to that Day is a time of grace. This is the time for all in this world to hear the Word of the Lord. It is a time for mankind to acknowledge their sin and guilt before God, and, turning away from that sin, turn to Jesus for righteousness and eternal life. Repentance involves more than acknowledging guilt. It involves more than feeling bad or guilty for one’s sin. It involves a turning away from sin and turning to the Lord for forgiveness for one’s sin. This is a time of grace in which the Lord calls all people from all nations to repent.

Yes, also in Old Testament times the Lord called for repentance, and promised life and forgiveness for those who believe. Isaiah recorded this gracious invitation.

*“Come now, and let us reason together,”*

*Says the Lord,*

*“Though your sins are like scarlet,*

*They shall be as white as snow;*

*Though they are red like crimson,*

*They shall be as wool.”* (Isaiah 1:18)

In the psalms David wrote of the forgiving grace and patience of the Lord:

*“He has not dealt with us according to our sins,*

*Nor punished us according to our iniquities.*

<sup>11</sup> *For as the heavens are high above the earth,*

*So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;*

<sup>12</sup> *As far as the east is from the west,*

*So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

<sup>13</sup> *As a father pities his children,*

*So the Lord pities those who fear Him.*

<sup>14</sup> *For He knows our frame;*

*He remembers that we are dust.”* (Psalms 103:10 – 14)

God calls people to repent, for the Day of Judgment is already selected. It is coming. Jesus will come again as the **Righteous** Judge. It is in His righteous judgment that we find the foundation of our hope, of our forgiveness, of peace with God and of the

eternal life promised in Jesus' name. **“He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him (Jesus) from the dead.”** (v.31)

How can we be sure that our sins, though they are like scarlet shall be as white as snow? How confident dare we be that God has removed our transgressions from us “as far as the east is from the west?” It is guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection from the dead! That is all the assurance we need! It is the greatest assurance that God could give! The redemptive price of Jesus' blood was graciously received by God. Our debt has been paid in full. Jesus takes our sins away, -- far, far away. The stain of sin has been removed forever for all who have faith in His name!

God calls us to repent. By the grace of God the Holy Spirit we have come to know and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. We have come to know and believe that He died for us and rose again that we might have forgiveness and life in His name. God has given assurance of this to all, and so most certainly to you and me by raising Jesus from the dead.

What that means for us in the end is that on that day appointed by God the Father on which Jesus shall the judge the world in righteousness, we shall be received into heaven that we might always be with the Lord!

How great a gift of grace has come to us that we have come to know the Unknown God! He has revealed Himself to us in His Son! He who created us has also redeemed us by the death of His Son and He has now called us to faith by the Holy Spirit working through that gospel message of a Crucified and Risen Lord.

**AMEN.**

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.