



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Is God Unknown?

Tim Hart-Andersen

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Acts 17:22-28a

The last three days I've spent a lot of time with Jews and Muslims. Temple Israel hosted a series of interfaith conversations to which I was invited. Four of us – two imams, a rabbi, and a Presbyterian minister – were asked to describe and discuss the core teachings of our traditions.

There were moments of commonality and of difference. Each of us said how we had come to know God in our own faith tradition. As is always the case when we genuinely listen to one another in interfaith conversation, I learned from my colleagues – almost more about myself and my tradition than about theirs.

Perhaps the most challenging part of the dialogue came when we were invited to teach a text from our own tradition that was troublesome. Having said how our tradition knows God, we were then asked to use our own sacred texts to contest that view. They wanted us to wrestle with a problematic piece of scripture, one that challenges our faith. What would you have chosen? I selected John 14: "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father but through me." (John 14:6)

That text is often cited as the basis for Christian exclusivity: we must be followers of Jesus to find our way to God...There is only one way. As I read John 14 in that interfaith context at Temple Israel, with Jews and Muslims in the room, it sounded immodest and disrespectful, maybe even hurtful, especially with the baggage it has produced over the ages.

But the life of Jesus seems to push in the opposite direction; he's always seeking to expand his followers' view of the wideness of God's love. He's always overcoming barriers and boundaries and stretching our understanding of God's love – including women in the circle, inviting those outside the community and those reviled by others to come inside, including children in his ministry. So the text presents us with a quandary: either God's love is wide-open and available to all, or it's limited to a certain few who make a confession of faith in Jesus Christ that meets the criterion.

I told the group at Temple Israel that scripture is its own best interpreter. John 14 should be read in light of other texts, including the previous chapter, John 13, where Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another...By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:14-15)

It's hard to love "the other" at the same time that you have decided they're outside God's embrace. I told the group that a narrow view of John 14 leaves little room for authentic interfaith dialogue, and in a multi-faith world that's a problem. If we're not careful a narrow view of our faith can arise from a text like that and lay a foundation for a worldview inside and outside the church that divides people into those who are inside the circle and those who are not, for whatever reason.

That's what the Apostle Paul faces in his visit to ancient Athens that we heard about in the reading in Acts.

I love the image of the Paul making his way through the streets of mid-first century Athens, taking in the sights and sounds and smells of that foreign place. The city had declined from its heyday during the time of Socrates, yet it still retained the reputation of being a place of great scholarship and intellectual curiosity.

Paul observes that it's also a place of tremendous piety; there are so many temples and shrines and idols that the wandering Apostle can scarcely believe his eyes. Into that religiously polyglot context Paul tries to bring his message about Jesus. He quickly realizes his proclamation is not being well-received among either Jews in the synagogue or intellectual debaters in the city marketplace. Some in Athens, in fact, are troubled by Paul's proclamation. Others are merely curious.

To settle their concerns and satisfy their curiosity, they bring Paul to the Areopagus, to Mars Hill, a broad open public space near the Acropolis in Athens. It's where city leaders resolve disputes in public.

"May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" they say politely to Paul. "It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." (Acts 17:19-20)

It's the opening and the audience for which Paul had been waiting. He begins by flattering them. "Athenians," he says, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way."

He may as well have been speaking to us, to Americans. We, too, are an extremely religious people, with a rich array of faith traditions, each with its own way of knowing God or naming the holy. For us, as Christians, how we understand John 14 will be a significant determinant in our ability to live together with those who hold differing religious claims, whether within our own tradition or in others.

The Apostle Paul's visit to Athens is a lesson for him in religious pluralism. He's astonished by the sheer number of religious practices he observes.

"For as I went through the city," he says, "And looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'"

We could infer that to cover their religious bases they had installed a "none-of-the-above" option for religiously-inclined, yet skeptical, Athenians – the *spiritual, but not religious* first-century Greeks.

Paul's words are a brilliant piece of rhetoric, *full of truth* – there *are* many altars and many gods in Athens – and also *full of irony* that would not have been lost on his listeners. The Apostle wants to work with this idea of an *unknown god*, but he wants to do it in a way that respects the religious realities of that city in that time.

I have sympathy for Paul. Interfaith dialogue is difficult. And sometimes it's even harder to have conversation with those of our own tradition, especially when it comes to the Bible.

The interpretation of scripture by some of our fellow Christians was in the news this week. Officials of the federal government used biblical texts to support the administration's "zero tolerance" policy of taking children from those entering the country illegally or to seek asylum. They quoted Romans 13:1 on obeying governing authorities, as if that were the only scripture that might inform our view of what is right when it comes to dealing with undocumented immigrants and their families.

There is no law that states children must be taken from parents if they're not legally in the country. Nor is there any biblical passage that would support such a cruel policy. In fact, the gospel is replete with texts that would reject such a conclusion.

"Whoever welcomes one such child," Jesus says, "Welcomes me." ... "Do unto others," he says, "As you would have them do unto you." ... "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

We have seen this week an egregious *misuse* of scripture in a disingenuous attempt to defend a practice that otherwise has no justifiable rationale or historical precedent or scriptural warrant. Those citing Romans 13, verse 1, to condone an unjust and immoral practice at the U. S. border would do well to read further in that same chapter, where Paul says,

"The commandments...are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ...Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13: 9-10)

If we claim – as we do, being Christians – that *God is love* and that Jesus commands us to love one another, then our interpretation of scripture must always be tested by the law of love. In the case of

our governmental officials this week, they fail the biblical test – let along a minimal standard of morality and human decency.

I can imagine the Apostle Paul looking quizzically at those who would purposely mistreat families and cynically use children for political leverage *and then justify it by quoting scripture*, and wondering if he were not back in Athens staring at an altar to an unknown god.

That is not the God we know in Jesus Christ, nor does it reflect what our nation stands for.

And we, you and I, are not passive bystanders. Our faith calls us to stand up and speak up and take action in defense of the most vulnerable members of the human family. Wherever injustice has the upper hand, if we ignore the call to resist it and keep silence instead, we risk becoming like those Athenians of long ago, who worshipped an unknown god.

I think Paul may have been grateful he stumbled onto the altar to an unknown god, because it gave him the opportunity to preach a counterpoint. He tells the Athenians that he worships and proclaims a *known* God; a God discovered in the wonder of the earth; a God who is creator of all that is; a God not made by human hands.

Paul works his way through the sermon, gently introducing them to this God he knows and wants to share with them. In his conclusion he declares that God, the source of all life, had sent a man – Paul doesn't say his name is Jesus – who, by being raised from the dead, offers to all the assurance of life everlasting.

When we baptize children today we will be speaking of that same promise, that same God, the one we, too, know in Jesus Christ.

At the conclusion of the interfaith dialogue this week a member of Temple Israel came up to me and said a friend of hers had told her she was ashamed to be a Christian. I was saddened by that, and so was she. We need not apologize for our faith. Our friends in other traditions expect us to hold fast to it and to live by it – and sometimes to call our fellow believers to account, as they will us.

The way we practice Christianity is not perfect, and admitting that in interfaith dialogue is a good place to start. But, ours is *not* an unknown God; we know God. We know God through the life and ministry of Jesus. We know God through the death and resurrection of this one whom we call Jesus the Christ.

His unconditional love is a lamp unto our feet, and his wide-open justice a light unto our path. Thanks be to God. Amen.