

**In Search of an Unknown God, Part 2**  
**June 1, 2014**  
**Rev. Laura Hehner**

Ok... so we're picking up right where we left off, last week.

But just as a recap, if some of you weren't here,

We opened more clearly into a conversation crucial to the church,  
touching directly into the point.

We've discussed issues of equality in the church more than a few times,  
without really naming the obvious issue at hand...

But last week, we delved healthily, and fruitfully, and fully  
into the conversation of what's happening right now,

Concerning civil rights issues facing the LGBTQ community...

... which (whether we identify as "straight" or LGBTQ) is *our* community, friends.

*Everyone's* community. Together.

... Comes down to the basic meaning of the word, right?

We started into the discussion talking about the different changes  
the church has experienced over time,

And some of the ways the church

has mistakenly committed the sin of *discrimination*,

holding *back* from the full inclusion of all sorts of people for a lot of years...

... including women, of course.

If you weren't here, I went into some of my own experiences of exclusion,  
as a female pastor... and the fact that women speaking in the church

was looked down upon for quite some time

(and still *is*, in some of the die-hard traditional sects).

(The church just to our left still won't allow for a human with two X chromosomes to speak of the love of God to a crowd...

...but thankfully this dangerously outdated mindset is finally fading in most places.)

Briefly we went over the old arguments used against having women in religious leadership,

Through the misapplication of the words of Paul...

And the ways those perceptions were first formed,

and later changed (all using the same book [lift bible] to argue the cause).

We went into interpretations and misinterpretations,

and the settings and mindsets from which these ideas evolved.

And shoo! It was a long one.

Sorry about that, folks... but this is an incredibly important topic---

--something crucial to sustaining the life of the church and our Christian communities,

So the thoughts are a little heavy, holding a *lot* of words in need of speaking.

But have no fear! Today's is much shorter.

After giving the longest sermon I've ever preached at Deer Park, last week,

Today's is even a little less lengthy than usual.

(This will help keep things in balance for us,

and give us more time to enjoy God in communion, too)

Last week, we covered all of this stuff,

but stopped just short of delving into what happened with Paul, in Acts 17.

And WOW. What an amazing sermon he gave, here.

I was in *awe* the first time I read the words.

Since we didn't have the liturgist read it earlier, I'll read it to you now:

From Acts, 17, verses 22-31:

(Acts 17) 22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus [ehr-ee-AH-puh-guhs] and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 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, 25 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. 26 From *one* ancestor he made *all* nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28 For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' 29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has *overlooked the times of human ignorance*, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Beautiful! If I were standing in that crowd, I would have been moved to follow.

---To spend time with Paul, and even to frightfully speak with him

if he would've done me the honor of keeping his company.

And yes, I believe he would have (we discussed this a bit last week...

...the way Paul's own words were used to move his religion

away from what he himself preached).

See, friends, because the truth is, I was wrong about Paul when I was younger.

It took a lot of years and reluctant studying to find out that Paul was actually one of the most *inclusive* of all the preachers and apostles of his time.

While the others wanted to keep the teachings of Christ largely in the thread of the Jewish tradition, with Jewish followers, Paul, having already stepped outside of himself, as a former Pharisee, Decided it would be right, and good---and necessary, in fact--- ---to spread the love and word of God to *all* people, everywhere.

After his conversion, Saul, now Paul, became known as “The Apostle to the Gentiles”... ... meaning to *everyone* outside of the Jewish lineage. ---Unheard of, in his time.

He traveled far from home, putting himself in horrible danger on a constant basis, in lands unknown, In order to reach out and share with *anyone* he could, the love he’d found in God through the life of Christ.

Such a beautiful thing.

I actually have a huge amount of respect for this man, now that I’m older--- ---Now that I’ve been better informed of who he was, and what he did.

And what Paul did, friends, was he laid the ground work for the very floor beneath our feet.

He set the world up to experience God’s *church*.

And after being struck blind, he opened his eyes with new sight, Envisioning a place available to *all* people.

And Paul had a very tactful way of doing this.

A visitor to foreign lands and cultures, talking about God---

--a pretty touchy topic, right?---

--He walked always on shaky ground, but God kept him standing straight, regardless of the challenges ahead.

In this sermon, what do we hear Paul say? What does he do?

Takes kind of a careful eye to see what he's doing, but once you see it---

---it's kind of like when people look for awhile at one of those old Magic Eye prints (remember those?)---

You can't help but see it, and continue staring in awe.

He opens up, saying 'look, I see you are all very religious people...'

...He's respecting where the people are. Who they are. Their own ways.

---Honoring their different way of being.

(And in doing this, we hear a call, don't we? For all of us in the modern church,

In the actions of one of the most influential people in the formation of the church,

We see what exactly was intended and hoped for, in the church...

...not something which forces its own traditions, its own biases...

...but something which opens up to be shared with people so far

outside of all of those things).

Then he goes on, and mentions something he noticed in their tradition...

...this altar to "the unknown God..."

And here he finds his opening. His common ground.

A way to work with people outside of his traditions,

And make a *connection*, right?

He says... ‘see this Unknown God?’

And then he does something brilliant here.

Got a rush of goosebumps just thinking about it...

...He says to them, ‘*This* is the God I speak of.’

And he doesn’t go off on all of the *Jewish* traditions and beliefs about this God,

But instead does what is right,

SHARING the experience of God WITH them, not against them.

He doesn’t open into this experience, describing God in his own ways, but in theirs.

He uses the words of *their* philosopher-poet, someone known more to THEM than himself---

Aratus [uh-RAH-tuhs] of Soli. And the words he uses is from *Phenomena*, verse 5

“For we are also his offspring,”

which Paul quotes verbatim in Acts 17:28, (which the biblical text itself

does not directly explain, so you’ve got to look a little deeper, yourself).

And he does all of this as a part of a radical *reframing* of both his belief and theirs.

He then goes on to describe the way God has no boundaries. No limitations.

And he tells them that this God he worships

is just as much a part of them as God is a part of himself.

And from there, in this gorgeously God inspired moment... because believe me, friends,

God does all of God’s work, not any one of us.

(Any time something worthwhile is said from an altar, or pulpit,  
it comes only from the love and glory of God, Itself.

And God shows God's self in this moment through Paul, so plainly. So beautifully.

Paul goes on, here, and describes the way God lives and breathes inside each one of us,  
Hoping to touch into the soul of ALL of his creation, in ALL nations.

Wanting only for us to WANT GOD. To reach for God. To GROPE for God, he says...

...And to find It. To finally feel the peace of God's touch in our lives...

... no matter who we are. No matter where we stand.

Nope. I was pretty much in love with Paul, after I read these words. Gotta admit.

Developed a little bit of a bible-crush on Paul, here.

(I don't know if that's a thing, but I guess it is, now.

...Hopefully the Book of Discipline will allow for it.

Might take a few years, but I'm sure they'll come through.) ;)

I say that lightheartedly, but there's actually some wonderful truth to that statement.

...See, because the United Methodist Church... the church I love and call home...

Well, it might not always move as fast as we'd like,

but it's been moving steadily in the right direction since its founding.

And that's something good. That's something right.

That's something to feel hope, in knowing.

I might've talked a lot, last week, about the experiences of women being held down in the religious structure for so many years... but what's happening right now?

A short woman with the squeaky voice of a cartoon---we're here together.

Worshipping God. Thinking about God, as a congregation united in God's love.

I'm standing here, miraculously and graciously wearing a robe and stole,

Capable of living into God's call to the ministry with an "official" title.

This is something which didn't exist before, but is now the case with some ease.

And I see this happening for our church very soon, regarding the civil rights issues we're now facing in including with full love and full respect,

Anyone from the LGBTQ community who also hears this call,

and is kind enough, and devoted enough, to follow.

Paul, in his sermon, here... calls for the church to be a certain way...

...He calls for not only the acceptance, but the embracing of \*all\* people.

He reminds us here, that God is for *all* of God's creation. Every single one of us.

No matter how different the culture.

No matter which way of living and experiencing is our own.

Paul reminds us that God created \*all\* things.

That God created *us*, and *all* of our ways----not the other way around. ...

And he finishes in stating that despite our human ignorance (through all of the ages),

God will work *through* us and *with* us forever, to clear the blur from our eyes,

And make us holy again. Make us whole, again.



This was Paul's vision for the church; and to me,  
it echoes so smoothly the words and teachings of Christ.  
And in echoing the words and teachings of Christ,  
what we hear are the words, the teachings, the thoughts,  
Of our all-knowing, all-loving, all-holy God.

So let's speak those words too. Let's repeat them over and over between each other,  
As we move once again, through a new phase of change—a radical reframing---  
in the way the church comes to the world,  
And invites *all* to enter these doors, and sit for a while, and speak for awhile,  
worshipping the indiscriminate touch of the Holy.

The fact that we're sharing this worship hour together, as we are,  
shows the ways the church has already been successful into wiping that blur away,  
And more clearly focusing on what's right---what's real.

And I know the Methodist Church, however long it takes, will make the changes it  
needs...

... it will see to the needs of God's people...

...reaching past familiar places into the unknown,

for the sake of sharing and spreading the spirit of God to anyone willing to feel it.

And to all people wanting to spread it, too, from where they stand.

But just like with Paul, it will take some work.

Scholars actually believe he only got about five converts after this sermon we just read.

Crazy. But beautiful.

It first takes a small group of passionate souls, to first whisper,  
then mutter, then shout, then proclaim without fear...

... and from there, we see miraculous things happen in this world

As God works through God's creation speak and move between us.

This month, we'll be hearing from Katriena (while Charles, the Grams, and I are at Annual Conference)

About how we can start those murmurs, here at Deer Park.

About the ways we can further live into Paul's hopes, and God's call, for this church  
to be an all-inclusive sanctuary of God's peace, for every tired soul,

to find themselves again, and rest awhile

before returning to some of the colder places outside these doors.

As we move through these new moments, like Paul, changing with the times,  
changing with *people* for the sake of all of God's creation,

And for God's sake, too....

Let's do all we can in this short time we're blessed to breathe and speak,

to help every single seeking soul, come to find and know their Unknown God.

And to empower each of us, no matter where we stand,

where we're from, or what we know as our own,

To lift up our arms and voices in praise of the Holy One inside of us all.

Amen.