

“To an unknown God”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Acts 17:22-31

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When the Apostle Paul arrived in the Greek city of Athens, he stepped into history. It was here that Cleisthenes instituted the world’s first democracy; here that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle philosophized; here that Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes penned plays for the Theater of Dionysus; here that Pericles oversaw the building of the Parthenon, its columns in perfect order arrayed against the blue sky, a statement of reason holding chaos at bay. By the time Paul arrived, Athens was no longer the seat of political power that it once was, but it bustled with merchants and philosophers and artists. There were Epicureans, who believed in the rule of pleasure, and Stoics, who prized virtue above all. Jewish people had lived in Athens for more than two centuries. Priests of Greek, Egyptian, Persian, and other religious sects stood on every corner.

The Book of Acts tells us that Paul found in Athens a city full of idols, statues depicting gods. But he also found a city full of ideas, passions, and loves, a city that had been wrestling with the mysteries of the universe for centuries before Jesus Christ ever walked the earth.

So, when Paul is called to give an account of the gospel, to tell them about Jesus Christ, he quotes *their* poets and *their* altars; he affirms their search for truth, saying that they have been guided all this time by God. Paul says, “From one ancestor, God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth... 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.”

Paul is not afraid to call out falsehood, to argue and debate. But long before he does, long before he ever evangelizes, he looks. He walks through the city, listens to the conversations, notices the details of the place. He discovers that a foundation for God is already there; he wasn’t bringing God to these people; he was awakening them to the God they had been seeking unawares.

He brings a piece of the puzzle they’ve been missing. He says, “I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown God.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” Paul says: I know the name of the object of your search, your need.

That got me thinking: What would Paul notice in Auburn, New York?

So I decided to be like Paul and go for a walk. Over the course of several days and many miles, I walked through the City of Auburn, particularly the neighborhoods near our church—north, south, east, and west. I walked through Fort Hill Cemetery, to Genesee Elementary, along the walls of Auburn Correctional, past Wegmans and City Hall, to Booker T. Washington Community Center and First Presbyterian. I walked past your house, Aaron and Andrea, Cole and Ryan; and your house, Paul and Kim; and your apartment building, Shavonn, KJ, and

Valerie; and your house, Susan and Lydia (I saw Lydia reading a book in her yard); and your house, Aja and Mike, Sam and Oliver. I saw Pamela sitting on the porch of her apartment wearing a safety mask.

It's so easy to bemoan the lack of faith in our community, to get upset that so few come to church. But what if God is out there, and we just haven't noticed?

So I decided to notice. To ask: What is Auburn's altar to an unknown God?

Let me tell you what I saw...

I saw a young boy playing alone in an overgrown yard, among piles of sticks and junk, obvious signs of poverty, and he's wearing a short sleeve shirt, even though it's 45 degrees out. No parental supervision. But he's got these two dogs trailing him. And he's happy. He has this determined gaze, and clearly, he's in some story in his mind. He didn't experience his life as impoverished—not in that moment, at least. I wonder what that boy could teach us about a joy, an abundance, untouched by the world around us.

I saw an American flag at half mast—many of them in fact. I saw sidewalks covered in chalk and messages of encouragement, signs placed in people's windows, expressions of solidarity. I read banners proclaiming that heroes lived here and celebrating graduations and sports victories. Lots of patriotism. I saw a sign in multiple languages, staked in a yard, which read, "Hate has no home here."

I saw lots of racial, economic, and age diversity in some of the neighborhoods closest to our church. White and black families living side by side—though in many cases not interacting. Lots of children, playing, riding bikes. Toys everywhere. Most of the people I saw, I didn't know, and that told me something.

I didn't see many political signs, a few; didn't see many allegiances to sports teams; didn't see many overt expressions of religious faith, though I did see one life-size statue of Mary in a yard.

I saw a house near Harriet Tubman's church, now burnt and shuttered, and whoever lived at this house had made their own street sign declaring Parker Street "Harriet Tubman Avenue." I guess they got tired of waiting for justice to catch up, and decided instead to catch up with justice.

I saw lots of resources and potential partners: parks, low income and assisted housing, places for physical and mental health, resources for the aging and people with disabilities, other churches, schools, funeral homes, artistic and cultural resources. Oh and so many dentists! Oh my God, there are so many dentists all crammed together. We all better have fantastic teeth!

I saw someone doing yoga at Fort Hill Cemetery. I saw kids playing in the cemetery, adults walking and jogging, as others came to remember and pray.

I saw that names are important in Auburn; they are etched on the sides of houses and buildings, historical signs, graves—some prominent in Auburn (Seymour, Seward, Case, Willard), and

some known to us (Dungey, Hardy, Foresman). I saw a place in which history is important, including its role in women's rights and the Underground Railroad. And I saw a place in which not all history is regarded and preserved equally.

I saw lots of pets. I saw boats, and RVs, and porch benches, and basketballs, and signs of people enjoying being outside.

I saw acts of service, people helping each other, from childcare to food.

I saw beauty. Trees and flowers, welcome signs and gardens, birds singing, people playing. I saw people who are like roses pushing through concrete.

I also saw pain. I saw a lot of folks struggling economically. I saw houses in decay. I saw big houses converted into multi-family units and apartments. I saw fear and a feeling of violation, of trespass. I walked through neighborhoods where nearly every house was guarded by security cameras, alarm systems, growling dogs, and signs... so many signs... that said, "No Trespassing," "Private Property," "No Soliciting," "No Loitering," "No Parking," "No Door Knocking," "No Blocking Driveway," signs warning of security cameras watching you right now, and one sign I particularly enjoyed which said that trespassers will be used for science experiments.

I overheard lots of loud, angry conversations, curse words, people really stressed out. I walked through areas drenched in litter, the remnants of soda cups and fast food, cigarettes and packaging. And I got to thinking: you throw your trash on the ground, because that's how the world's made you feel—disposable.

Clearly, Auburnians care about their children; their security; their outdoor spaces; and their nation, their history, their sense of belonging, community, identity. Some may feel that we've become disconnected from the past, and we are living in a diminished time.

Auburn's altar to an unknown God cries out for Someone who cares for our children, Someone who can make us safe, Someone who can give us beauty and nature, Someone who can mend the rift between past and present, offering identity, belonging, and respect.

I know Someone like that. Maybe you do too. Paul did. I wonder how we could awaken people to the God who is already among them.

We as a church could help enhance those green spaces and playgrounds. We could offer more outdoor events and ministries. We could provide items of encouragement and beauty to be placed in yards and on houses. We could connect with neighboring families and build a ministry with them. We could partner with residents to better secure our neighborhoods, with relationships and trust. We could host cook-outs and gatherings, working to build a sense of community. We could do a campaign that recognizes current heroes and people/events/places worthy of history, showing that the good isn't all in the past, while also recovering less-emphasized parts of our past. We could promote and expand our veterans ministry. We could

partner with neighbors to do, together, monthly or even weekly days of service, picking up litter, planting flowers, trimming trees, fixing houses, growing food, and connecting it all to our faith.

Our job isn't to bring God to our neighbors. God's already there, in every act of service, every sign of defiant life and beauty, every child playing. Our job is to go out and meet God there, in our neighborhoods, to learn from God there, and help people see the God that is already among them, the God who already loves them, the God who already has a path of hope for them. Our job is to walk that path with them. Till kingdom come. **Amen.**