

Proclaiming the Unknown that You Worship – The Rev. Giovan Venable King+  
Easter 6A – May 21, 2017 - Acts 17.15-34 – St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Kailua

So, how many of you have ever been to Athens, Greece? ... What stood out to you? For many, it is the Parthenon, which was built for the goddess Athena, the goddess of wisdom, craft, and –for some strange reason – also for war. Athens is named for her. But, I didn’t realize until Tom and I visited about a decade ago that the Parthenon was at one time a Christian Church. And, of course, there are today several churches, all through the city of Athens. In fact, on the one Sunday we spent in Athens, we went to church in Athens and ran into a friend we’d just made in Corfu.

Paul’s preaching in Athens, generally remembered as not having been so successful, obviously did take hold. As I mentioned in the e blast this week, Paul first arrived in Athens after having essentially been run out of the town of Berea, in northern Greece. His Christian friends plopped him onto a ship headed south towards Athens.

Now, Paul had been used to seeing monuments and shrines to the Greek and Roman gods, as an inhabitant of the Greco-Roman world. But, he had never seen as many as he saw when he entered Athens. This troubled him greatly.

How would he address them when he spoke to them in the marketplace – the agora? Well, in his usually politic way, he seems to commend them on how religious they are (too often that term – “religious” – has a negative connotation today, but it comes from a root word: “religio” – which refers to that which ties folks together). Anyway, Paul took the opportunity to remark on something that had made a big impression on him.

At one of the Athens harbors, apparently, there were altars to the Goddess Artemis (goddess of hunting), and one to Demeter (goddess of agriculture), but also at least one altar to “unknown gods.” The Greeks were open to the possibility of other gods besides their own, and wanted to make sure that they didn’t slight any god. So, erecting altars to unknown gods was a way of covering all of their bases, so to speak.

Note, that Paul’s reference is an altar to “AN unknown God.” He was almost surely talking about an altar, that still exists, to “unknown gods,” in the plural, but it seems he took some poetic license to make his point. “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you,” Paul says. He tells them that the one God is God of all, from creation on; the one God needs nothing from us, but rather provides everything for us; we are children of this one God; this one God is near every one of us.

Now, that’s the kind of evangelizing I like. Paul doesn’t chastise them, telling them that they don’t really know God, that they aren’t really Christians, that they are going to hell, or Hades, if they don’t sign on to Paul’s God, exactly as Paul describes him. Paul tells them that they have been worshiping this creator God, this loving God, all along – they just haven’t realized it.

That sure speaks to me. During my final year in divinity school – 1982-83, I dutifully completed what they call a “profile”, in the Congregational Church, to be used by churches searching for a minister. And I was to ask several references to fill out a questionnaire about me.

One of the areas in which I was most strong was this: that I do not judge the faith of others, and that I am accepting of a variety of views of belief. I am sure that I’m actually more liberal than is Paul about this.

But, I do like Paul's evangelizing very much. The Athenians had different religious views than did Paul, to be sure. For instance, their views on life after death seemed to differ markedly from Paul's, and Paul addresses that in some of his letters. But, they really were open to hear what Paul had to say.

And, it is noteworthy that Dionysius the Aeropagite, one of the most important men in the city, apparently became a believer that day. It is also noteworthy that a woman named Damaris also became a believer. There is an indication that there were others as well.

Paul was no failure in Athens. And, the Parthenon wasn't just a monument to the Greek goddess Athena. "Parthenos" means virgin in Greek, and Athena was believed to be a virgin. The Parthenon, dedicated to the virgin Athena, eventually became a Christian Church dedicated first to Saint Sophia – that is, to Holy Wisdom. Later, it was dedicated to someone besides Athena who was also referred to as "parthenos" – "virgin" – it was dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

You just never know what's going to happen when you evangelize – you share the good news of our God in Jesus Christ. And, sometimes, when you, or others, believe you have been a failure, that's when you've been the most successful. Or, as I'm sure Paul would be quick to say, "That's when GOD has been the most successful."

Amen.