

Knowing Our God

During this portion of the church year when we are post resurrection but are officially waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit fifty days post resurrection the lectionary gives us readings from the sequel to Luke's gospel which is known as the Acts of the Apostles instead of a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. The first portion of Acts describes that dramatic arrival with loud wind and tongues of fire which contrasts to John's description of the risen Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the fearful disciples in that locked room on that first day when he suddenly appeared among them. That dramatic arrival is followed by an equally dramatic change in the disciples as they leave the locked room and their fear to begin proclaiming the message of the risen Lord in the public square, not only in Jerusalem but everywhere they go. Today's reading from Acts occurs some time later, after the young Saul who witnessed and approved the martyrdom of disciple Steven encounters the risen Jesus on the Damascus road and becomes a witness also proclaiming Christ's identity and mission. Paul has begun working his way through the known world carrying the gospel message as he travels. This reading gives us insight into how this Pharisaic Jew trained in Mosaic Law and tradition now understands his God and God's work to redeem the entire world. Paul is in Athens waiting on two others to join him in his mission of spreading the good news. Athens is a large cosmopolitan center located in Greece known for being a marketplace not only of trade but also of ideas. While there he observes the many temples built to various "gods", including one with an altar inscribed "to an unknown god." Paul is and always has been a resolutely monotheistic Jew and now he cannot help himself but respond to this and engages in a discourse with those present in the marketplace as he proclaims the Good News he carries. Athenians were known for their intellectual curiosity, openness and love of debating in the marketplace. They love to debate all things metaphysical, especially any new idea. Paul demonstrates his knowledge of the teachings and philosophies among them, complementing them on their religiousness through quotes from their own poets. So Paul accepts the invitation to proclaim at the Areopagus before the cities' leaders. Paul knows the philosophies held by these people. He begins with a point of agreement with them that no one there thinks that deities dwell inside manufactured things. After Paul established this foundation of common agreement he then moves to explain that the God he knows appoints the natural order by creating all, so that "in him we live and move and have our being." Paul argues that God created humanity with the intent that humanity would search for God as previous Hebrew writings revealed. This means that their search has merit but there are not numerous gods; they have just been misguided in their understanding of how the search is successful. The god they have described as being "unknown" is actually the one God who made the world and everything in it. Therefore their "unknown god" is actually the God he proclaims. God has overlooked human ignorance in the past but has now called everyone to repent through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth who God has raised from the dead. Despite the Athenians fascination with "new" things which has led to Paul's invitation to address them at the Areopagus, Paul proclaims the "unknown god" has been there among them all along and remains near to each one. This nearness of God which Paul proclaims to the Athenians is the theme of the last portion of Jesus' farewell address that appears as our gospel reading from John this morning. In this brief but powerful passage, on the night he is betrayed Jesus seeks to prepare his closest friends and disciples for the coming events. Jesus reiterates

his favorite theme: love. This portion opens with the declaration “if you love me, you will keep my commandments.” This statement introduces Jesus’ promise that he will ask God the Father to give them another Advocate, the promise that the Holy Spirit will come to “abide in them.” This passage highlights the intimate relationship which exists between God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus feels free to ask for another Advocate to come when he is no longer there. It is an important point made here that Jesus tells them when he leaves another Advocate will come. That is because he will no longer be there to guide them into the ways pleasing to God the Father. To serve as Jesus with them is one of the roles the Advocate will fulfill when Jesus rejoins the Father. The Greek word used here is transliterated as Paraclete and is translated variously as Comforter, Advocate, Counselor, and Helper. Paraclete carries all these meanings...in Greek it literally means to come along side. The Holy Spirit is specifically said to do the following: teach, remind, abide, and testify about Jesus. The Advocate comes after Jesus leaves because as a man Jesus’ influence and presence was local; the influence of the Paraclete is throughout all creation all the time. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit deals in truth. John’s pneumatology is unusual compared to the other gospel accounts because of this clear establishment of the intimate relationship within the Godhead which also expands to include us. In John, Jesus insists that the intimate relationship which exists between him, God and the Spirit also includes believers. The believer does not stand close by admiring the majesty of the Trinity but rather is an integral part of it as the Advocate comes to dwell within. John tries to push at this by grabbing hold of a number of terms and repeating them over and over, which makes the sentences convoluted but clearly relational. These words are: abide, love and the language of “being in” with an emphasis on the oneness of those within this relationship. Jesus asks them: “Do you not believe I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own but the Father who dwells in me does his work. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:10-11). In today’s passage this indwelling will now include those who believe in Jesus so they will have an advocate dwelling within to give them all that Jesus has been doing through his ministry. This passage begins and ends with the theme of love. Declaring when the Advocate comes they will know that Jesus has come to dwell in them so “they who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. Jesus is promising a deep relationship which is transformative. Everything that matters, that is, ultimate intimacy with God and Christ is available through the Advocate. God is not currently holding out on us in any way—life, abundant life, is available for living from this moment into eternity. The question for us is how do we come to know and see the Holy Spirit among us...especially since so rarely outside of this time of year seem to even seek to find and see that presence with and among us establishing that intimacy described here. In this passage we get two insightful clues that together offer a pretty good picture of just what the Holy Spirit looks like among us. That first clue is that the Holy Spirit that third member of the Trinity looks like the Advocate...the name given in today’s text. The Holy Spirit is the one who stands up for you when you need it, the one who speaks on your behalf, the one who lends you a helping hand, takes your side, and won’t leave you while you’re down. The second clue is that the Holy Spirit looks like Jesus. The Spirit is “another advocate” because Jesus is the first. The Spirit, Jesus goes on to say will abide with us just as Jesus the Word made flesh has abided with us. The Spirit is sent in Jesus’ name and reminds us of what he taught. In a very real way the Spirit

mediates Jesus' presence and helps to keep his promise that he will now leave us orphaned and will come to us. Since the Holy Spirit is an advocate that looks a whole lot like Jesus we can see the Spirit lots of times. Anytime in fact someone stands up for another...anytime someone acts like Jesus...anytime someone bears the love of Christ to another...the Holy Spirit is visible. So when we follow those commandments that Jesus gave, then the Holy Spirit is visible through the love expressed within them. "If you love me you will keep my commandments." This statement by Jesus appears twice in this brief passage as a bookend making the connection between love of Jesus and obedience to what Jesus taught. Love and obedience thus go hand in hand.

Unfortunately in our culture the idea of keeping commandments is not nearly as often in the forefront of our thoughts as love. Our culture is all about love...perhaps not always (or often) the kind of *agape* love of Scriptures, but love nonetheless. We use the word "love" frequently with our "heart" chocolate, New York and NPR stickers. We are encouraged to "show" our love through gifts of flowers, cards and jewelry...especially around times like today...Mother's Day. Popular music is infused with love and has been in every generation's playlist from "Love is All you Need" to "I will Always Love You". Love, in more or less biblical forms, is ubiquitous. The emphasis on love is right, needed and scripturally supported. And yet, we are presented in John's gospel with Jesus telling disciples that following his commandments is inseparable from love of him. When we only focus on love something important, life giving and life-saving is absent...the following of commandments. It has to do with the keeping together those three admonitions in Micah: Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. Love and trust go together. We can't trust those who fail to keep promises; and keeping promises entails following the commandments God has set before us. And of course, the greatest of these is loving God and neighbor. So the cycle returns to love and our need for the Advocate to give us guidance. Remembering that the Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of truth, our Advocate, the One who teaches and guides, reminds, encourages, strengthens and testifies because we need that help if we are to follow Jesus' commandments, especially the greatest of them. The song which tells us love is all we need may be true but if we are to love as Jesus commands us, we need the Advocate, divine intervention to actually do it. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

