

5 EASTER

[5 EAST 1ST LUTH Paul in Athens]

1ST LUTHERAN

Acts 17:16-34; Matthew 18:10-14

Our Known God

I have a *What is it?* riddle for you...

It is greater than God...

It is more evil than the devil.

The poor have it...

The rich need it... and

If you eat it you'll die. What is it?

-<https://riddlesbrainteasers.com/greater-than-god/>

Raise your hand if you know the answer:

The answer: NOTHING...

NOTHING is greater than God...

NOTHING is more evil than the devil.

The poor have NOTHING ...

The rich need NOTHING ... and

If you eat NOTHING you'll die.

Sometimes we're certain of the things we know, occasionally we have to hedge our bets, and then there are those times when the only thing we can do is throw a *hail mary* and hope it's caught for a touchdown.

It's no accident that *knowing...and NOT knowing* is the theme of our bible story for today.

It feels good when you have the knowledge that's needed at the right moment: what to do when the power goes out, when a child gets sick, when life throws us a surprise and we have to react. At other times, the knowledge we have to share might be less than significant.

For example, Carolyn and I like to work together on the Sunday crossword puzzles in the Minneapolis Tribune. We're the perfect pair because I like to answer the clues to the small words while she likes to go after the long

ones...oftentimes she nails them before I even have a chance to look at them, but together, we get it done.

Occasionally she'll ask me if I know the answer to a particular clue...and my response will be – *I have **no** idea if this is correct, but something in my little pea brain says that the answer is _____*. More times than not, I'm right – which surprises both of us!

But the truth is, I'm right not because I'm brilliant... It's just that I apparently have the ability to tap into useless bits of information that are only needed for a crossword puzzle. It's not much of a superpower, is it?

It does not benefit humanity, there's no money in it, the world will forever remain unchanged by much of the knowledge that I can share...but there you have it...that's my gift...

Knowing...and NOT knowing

It's a theme that has come to assume almost epic proportions in our modern American mindset.

Some of you will remember back to June of 1973. Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee, while questioning John Dean about the Watergate break-in that led to President Nixon's resignation, asked that iconic question: ***What did the president know, and when did he know it?***

Knowing...and NOT knowing

In our first Bible story for today, the Apostle Paul finds his way to the ancient, amazing, awe-inspiring city of Athens in the country of Greece. Countless legendary characters have walked its significant streets, people like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; Alexander the Great and Hippocrates, the Physician. It was the birthplace of democracy and at one time the center of culture and knowledge for the entire western world.



Athens, as Paul quickly discovered, also featured statues to all kinds of gods like: Zeus and Athena, Apollo and Aphrodite. It has been reported that at one time Athens hosted over 30,000 statues to various heroes and gods.

Sophocles, a famous author of Greek tragedies, once said about Athens: *“This city exceeds all others in worshipping the gods.”* (Apparently they KNEW how to honor the gods!)...*And later, a Roman advisor for Emperor Nero humorously said, “It was easier to find a god in that city than a man.”*

<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/17-16.htm>

It was very important for the Greeks – and later, the Romans – to **know** their gods...

For instance, if you were a farming family hoping for a good crop, you might offer a sacrifice to the goddess Persephone because her area of influence was Grain. But, then, you wouldn't want to ignore an offering to Zeus, because this “father of all gods” controlled, among lots of other things, the weather. Grain needs rain, right?

So it wasn't always easy to figure out exactly which god you should support for a request. Here's another example. Let's say you were a married couple with one child, but you really hoped to have another. On the one hand, you'd want to offer a sacrifice to the goddess Hera who watched over families. On the other hand, the goddess Aphrodite was important to the conception process, so...you'd probably end up paying for a sacrifice to both gods...

God forbid (pun intended!) that you would offend a god – even by your ignorance – for not honoring them with an appropriate sacrifice! Neither Greek nor Roman gods were very interested...in **forgiveness**...

As you can see, it was a rather demanding and often expensive process for the average family. Says one expert on the subject:

It was necessary to appease all the gods and...offend none of them. If through their actions, people were fortunate enough to stand in the good favor of the gods at their time of death, they would be granted immortality and live in Elysium, the paradise for heroes...

But...if they offended the gods, they would be sent to dwell in the depths of the underworld for eternity. So in the Greek tradition, heroic works determined one's hope for salvation.

- <http://www.dartmouthapologia.org/apologia/greek-mythology-and-the-christian-doctrine-of-god/>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Elysium-Greek-mythology>

Now, by the time that Paul made his way to Athens, many of the Greek gods had been re-named by the conquering Romans... And on top of that, it was the emerging practical gods that had taken center stage. By practical gods I mean that 2-fisted Roman tandem: 1) politics and 2) commerce. Politics because the emperors all claimed to be sons of God, and commerce because...that's the way of the empire – ruling the world is an expensive proposition!

The people of Athens were still considered worldly and sophisticated, and in addition to all of their gods, they were also very proud of their philosophies – ideas about how to live their lives in the best way possible.

Paul began speaking with the city's elders who met every day on a hill looking down on the marketplace and, as you can see in the picture, and up toward the Parthenon – the ancient temple to the goddess Athena.

At this point in time, these Greek philosophers were mostly divided into two camps: the Epicureans and the Stoics. Of course, each group KNEW that THEIR ideas would lead to the truest experience of life as the gods desired.

The Epicureans believed that basically, this life is all that the gods have given us, so we'd better *eat, drink and be merry*, because once we die – that's it!! The old Schlitz Brewing Company ad captured this sentiment well when the country was told: *You only go around once in life...so go for all the gusto!*

The Stoics stood on the **opposite** side of the fence: they were sure that our highest calling in life was...self-denial. If we Midwesterners are teased about being very practical, and not too excitable, and, possibly even boring in our predictability, then we're kind of the spiritual children of those Stoics.

A seminary professor told a story that this sense of Minnesota stoicism. When his father was little boy, the U.S. entered WWI (turns out it was 101 years ago this very month!!).

Having heard the disturbing news, his mom sent him out to tell his father who was in the fields mending fences. Breathless from running, the boy still managed to exclaim, *Dad! The whole world is at war!!* Apparently his grandfather's hammer never missed a beat, as he replied in a purely stoic fashion, *This, too...shall pass...*

So now the big job of those Athenian elders was to investigate and vet all people who came proclaiming new ideas, philosophies or theologies. Well, Paul is smart and before he's invited to have his day in court, he spends some time seeing the sights and learning about these Greeks. He knows that the best way to connect with people is to learn something about them, to be interested in their story.

While out and about one day Paul discovers in their city an altar that had been built with this title on it: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD... And we know that made Paul stop and think...



So after biding his time and listening to those people talk about what they **KNEW** about how to survive and thrive in life, Paul is finally invited to speak. His introduction is a work of art.

He begins by pointing out the obvious – temples and idols for worship on every street corner should indicate a depth of knowledge about God and a strong devotion to their faith, right? *Athenians*, he starts, *I see how extremely religious you are in every way...*

Do you think Paul was being complimentary...or did he detect a hole in the hearts of these Athenians? These people who had tried and tried for centuries to do what was right – and still they had no peace?

Maybe he sensed that the people had grown tired of trying to appease all those gods, all the time. Or, maybe since the gods of **Rome** now had all the power, the people of Athens were spiritually ready to hear something new...

For whatever reason, Paul seems to know exactly what he's doing – and immediately seizes on that image of an altar to an **unknown god**. He says to them (in so many words):

You have a god for every concern in life, and you spend your days running from this temple to...that – or another one! Yet, the fact that you have an altar to an unknown god means that something's not quite working for you. You KNOW which gods you must worship and why...so why an altar to an unknown god?

And here Paul seizes on that most unpretentious altar, to a god without a name, and then proceeds to flip their world upside down. He tells them: *This is what you've been looking for. This is what the **world** has been seeking – and will continue to seek...until the **UNKNOWN becomes** **KNOWN**.*

This is the God I know, says Paul. The Creator of the World, the Author of Life, the One who made us all in his image – we are all children of this amazing God – even your own poets understand that.

Then Paul tells them that this great God above all other gods, has chosen to work through a man who died, and who was raised from the dead. And not only has this Jesus been raised from the dead, but, while alive, he was also a great teacher.



Paul's goal was twofold: to make sure that we all know the name of the only true God, and to know God's greatest purpose in life: to convince people to repent, to turn their lives around, to stop living only for themselves and start living to serve their neighbors.

We just read Jesus' story about the lost sheep. One day a Shepherd discovers that one of them had become lost. He was so concerned about that one little sheep that he left all 99 of the others on their own, so that he could go out and find the one that was lost. That's one dedicated shepherd, isn't it?

Yet Jesus isn't really talking about how a good shepherd should be dedicated to all of his sheep. Instead, he's talking about this KNOWN God and his relationship with people like us. He's telling us that God KNOWS us and cares about us absolutely. In fact, he loves us so much that he will not sit by and watch us stumble around in the dark trying to find some unknown god.

Instead, just like that shepherd in Jesus' story, so God will do anything and everything to come find us and bring us safely home whenever we wander away from his love and care.



Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer and Catholic theologian who lived in the mid-17th century. He writes about the

same sense of our human condition that Paul found in his audience in Athens...1700 years earlier. Which, as you no doubt, know: is the same predicament that we all find ourselves in – our insistence on trying to fill our hearts with things that are humanly known.

Says Pascal, What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself.

[page 75 of Blaise Pascal's *Pensees* (New York; Penguin Books, 1966).]

As someone else once said, There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God...the God whom we KNOW as Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord."

Thanks be to God. Amen.