

Reading from the New Testament: Acts 17:22-31

*Knowing Jesus Christ*

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Let's do some imagining. What if a someone from the most remote and isolated place in the world ... someone who had absolutely no knowledge of the modern world ... suddenly arrived in Decatur and started looking around ... let's call her Nancy to make it easier ... what do you think Nancy would see? What do you think she would learn about us? And what do you think she would believe we worshipped?

I suppose if Nancy spent any time at all watching a TV, she might think we crowned a new king the other night ... a new American Idol! No doubt about it ... there was a lot of extreme interest in the final show of the season. And since she wouldn't know anything about our worship practices ... or anything about Jesus ... maybe Nancy would even wonder what those colorful golden arches represented in our culture ... were these places where we worshiped our gods ... and then, of course, she might wonder about those other people we place up on lofty perches and do seem to worship . . . why do people cry and scream when Lady Gaga makes one of her dramatic stage entrances ... and why do people pay so much attention to Charlie Sheen?

She might even wonder ... do we worship that young couple ... Kate and William? If she looked at where we spent our money ... she'd probably get a whole other opinion of what we worshiped ... if she paid any attention to our modes of transportation ... well there's another idol of our worship.

But I wonder if Nancy would pay any attention to the buildings scattered here and there with crosses on top of them. Would she have any idea what they were? Would she have any idea what goes on inside of them? I doubt it.

But what if Nancy came into our church ... what would she see? What would she understand about us? What would she learn about our faith and our beliefs? What would she leave here knowing about Jesus Christ?

Well, think about that as we consider what the Apostle Paul was up against when he made a trip to Athens. The citizens of Athens had absolutely no idea who the God Paul worshiped was ... they had never heard the stories of how Yahweh had led the Hebrew people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. And they certainly had never heard of Jesus. They lived in a polytheist world in which there were many gods ... many idols ... even an idol to an unknown god ...

I supposed he was a backup god just in case they missed something. So how was our great evangelist going to share the good news of the Gospel with these folks? How would you go about it? Listen with your hearts to God's word from the 17th chapter of Acts, verses 22-31. I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version.

Out of respect for the Word of our Lord, those who are able, please stand for our reading.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus 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."

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well ... somehow we all seem to have survived the most recent apocalypse ... or did we?

I find it rather sad that so many people were attracted to the prophesies of Harold Camping, who really didn't know what he was talking about. He follows a long line of misguided prophets who lead many people down a path to nowhere. Now this would be a perfect time to share with you the countless jokes I've heard about Camping and his followers.

But honestly ... I don't want to do that. Because what's really made me even sadder is the great black eye such upside down predictions about end times give to the true message of Jesus Christ. Many people have taken advantage of this false prediction as a means to label Christianity as a false religion.

Unfortunately, this world seems to be full of such people who claim to have some kind of inside track on what God Almighty is planning for the world ... particularly when it comes to the final

day of Judgment. But let me make this clear ... the god portrayed by Harold Camping is not the God I worship.

The God I worship is not standing up in heaven ready to unload a destructive program of pent-up anger and wrath upon the world. The God I worship died on a cross and rose again from the dead for our salvation because of God's unconditional love for us.

I am reminded of that by Paul in his letter to the Romans when we hear that good news: Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun.

But the May 21 prophecy still reminds us that ... like the Athenians of Paul's day ... there are still many false prophets and false idols in this world ... sharing all kinds of words and symbolisms with a world that has such a deep spiritual hunger ... that longs for something to fill a void inside all of us ... just as Paul noticed about the Greeks ... "they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him."

The truth is ... we spend most of our lives searching for God ... groping for some assurance that our lives are not just a random roll of the cosmic dice ... wanting to know for certain that we are not forgotten ... that there is a purpose to us being in this world ... we search and we search ... we hunt for answers throughout our lives.

Some people seek their answers in pyramids or crystals ... some end up lost in the maze of addictive behaviors ... some are totally confused about their faith because they have been deeply hurt by the church ... others follow leaders who claim to know when it will all end ... while still others build idols based on wealth and power ... and then there are some ... who find their way by following Jesus Christ.

So what do we tell Nancy when she comes into our church ... seeking her own answers about her life ... wondering, too, what it's all about? And what do I say to you in this place ... here and now ... who also may be struggling to believe in something ... who are searching for some meaning for your life. Maybe you are asking me this very question right now ... *Who is this Jesus Christ you say you worship and why do you follow him and not some other idol in this world?*

OK ... I'll tell you what I believe. Jesus Christ is all about unconditional love and living in relationship with each other and with God. Following Christ isn't about figuring out why I'm here or when it's all going to be over ... it's the realization that that I am here ... a child of a loving Creator who longs for me to be the person I was created to be.

I sometimes find it hard to believe that God could love me that much ... could love all of us that much ... so much so that our Lord was willing to be born into this world ... to fully know what it is like to be tempted by the idols of this world ... to know what it is like to be hungry and thirsty ... what is like to feel alone and rejected ... what it is like to be misunderstood and persecuted all in the name of love ... and then to be willing to accept death for my sins and the sins of this world in one horrific act of pain and suffering ... again ... all in the name of love ... unconditional

love ... because He is our Savior. And he rose from that grave ... and He is a living God who offers us something so amazing ... something we can never earn for ourselves ... eternal love in relationship with Him.

I hope you, too, will come to know my Savior. Though I am far from perfect ... I hope that you will see the love of Christ in the way I live my life. Because I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior ... and I pray that you, too, will have the joy of experiencing the mystery of His love in your heart. I pray that you will never consider yourself so lost ... so broken ... so undeserving of anyone's love ... so sinful ... that you don't believe you're worthy of another chance ... because our God will never reject you ... no matter what you've done in the past ... Jesus Christ is always there ... with you ... surrounding you ... calling you back to him.

I hope that you can feel the longing He has for you to come home when the way seems so lost. I pray that you will lean on him when you are hurting ... emotionally, physically or spiritually ... that you will feel his presence when you aren't sure he even exists ... and that you will celebrate and know His blessings when life overwhelms you in times of joy.

I pray also that you will experience his love in this place ... this church ... this community of faithful, who, through his amazing love and grace ... support each other ... pray for each other ... worship together ... and who, through the power of the Holy Spirit ... welcome everyone who comes into this church ... who reach out to those who are lost in this world ... reminding them that they, too, are children of our amazing Lord ... that they are not forgotten ... that they are created in His image and we stand ready to be in relationship with them.

I pray you will come to know him through His words ... through the healing waters of baptism and the bread of life and the cup of salvation ... that you will experience his loving acts ... through his disciples ... and through his never-ending grace ... now and forevermore. Because there is always hope in Jesus Christ ... and in the end ... whenever that may be ... it is Christ who will reconcile this world in love ... putting it all back together ... the way it was always meant to be.

Now I don't know what Nancy would say to me.

I don't know if she would be willing to begin a journey to know Jesus Christ ... or if she would turn around and just walk away. It is only Christ who can touch her heart ... we are just called to live as disciples ... who model as well as we can ... a Christ-like life in the world ... and who are willing to share the Good News of the Gospel in any way we can.

In other words ... we don't have to worry about sealing the deal ... Christ will take care of that.

It was Henri Nouwen who once said ... "Our life is full of brokenness - broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live with that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful ... except by returning again and again to God's faithful presence in our lives."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

