

“A God Worth Knowing”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Acts 17:19-28
Old Testament lesson: Psalm 97:6-9

“We were meant to enjoy, to delight, to celebrate. To be fascinated by presence, mystery. To be wonder, amazement, (a) surge of realization. To be so sensitive to patterns of beauty, that they interest us and dwell in us from that time on.”¹

This was quoted by Edward LeRoy, Jr., not about Christians, but about the demise of what he called “frolic” in the life of academia. In other words, professors and college administrators had let their work ethic undermine their sense of joy and fun as educators.

I believe the same can be said about the church in North America. We are so dedicated to maintaining everything we’ve ever done while adding new and innovative ministry programs that we risk losing our sense of joy and fun as a church. And who wants that?

In Our New Testament lesson for today, the Apostle Paul is facing a similar problem. He’s walking the ancient streets of Athens and notices how they are dotted with statues and idols to all types of Greek gods.

“Athenians,” he says, “I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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.’

Now I imagine Paul had a rather sly, friendly smile on his face when he said this. I bet he let out a great belly laugh when he first saw this statue to “An Unknown God.” Here’s Paul traveling through a city full of gods and idols trying to figure out how to introduce people to the risen Lord, whom they’ve never met, and he comes across a statue to a god they’ve never met – an unknown god.

That’s perfect. God is so good, and Paul must have taken great joy in that. And in the end, that’s what Paul shares with the people of Athens – his joy in knowing God, and not just any god, but the God, a God worth knowing.

¹ Ross Snyder, quoted in Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., *Higher Education as a Moral Enterprise* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 63. The late Ross Snyder was a professor of Christian education at Chicago Theological Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary in the 1970s and ’80s.

Paul says to them, “What therefore you worship as unknown,” “this I proclaim to you. 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, 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.” Now is that not joyful news! It just lifts up your heart and makes us want to know more about this God Paul is describing.

Notice how it is that Paul goes about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. He begins by taking note of what’s happening in the lives of the people around him, saying to them, “I have seen how extremely religious you are...”

Well, we might do the same in sharing in the lives of others – “I have seen how passionate you are about your family, your career, your garden, your car or motorcycle, your girlfriend or boyfriend, your hobby or whatever. If you want to attract new people to First Presbyterian Church, start by **meeting them where they are**; engage with them in what they are already interested in.

That’s what Paul does in building up the church; he meets people where they are, and then he points to some common ground where he and all people can stand together. “From one ancestor,” says Paul, “(God) made all nations to inhabit the whole earth.” In other words, we are all connected as human beings, as a part of creation. Doesn’t that make you feel more alive, more connected to God, more excited about being a part of a community of faith that know a God worth knowing.

Next, Paul affirms the people around him. He basically says, don’t surround yourselves with statues to gods, because God made human beings “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him, and find him....” In other words, everyone is searching for something, for a higher meaning to life, for a connection to the divine spirit of God. That’s why the streets of ancient Athens were lined with idols and statues to the gods.

Whatever people are searching for today, God is at the center of that desire. Paul says this; he says, “In (God) we live and move and have our being.” That’s useful knowledge for us in sharing our lives with others. If you know someone struggling in life – or if you yourself are struggling – look in the midst of that struggle for a way to connect to God. There is no doubt that God is there for us, just waiting for us to turn to him. “Indeed,” says Paul, “(God) is not far from each one of us.” So if God is not far from us, **what gets in way**; what gets in between us and God’s desire for us as a church – as a fun, joyful, thriving community of faith.

Thom Schultz in his Internet blog lists five things getting in the way for many churches and what can be done about it:

No. 1) put the emphasis on personal relationships;

No. 2) focus on Jesus above and beyond attendance, buildings, and cash;

- 3) engage the needs of the community;
- 4) share God's love with one another;
- And No. 5) invite new people to serve in planning and leadership roles.

First Presbyterian Church is making headway in all of these areas. Our new Small Groups ministry and the Sunday morning Young Adults group are each focused on personal relationships. These and our existing small groups are critical to the future of this church. If you've not thought about participating or inviting others to a group you're already involved with, you really are missing out, because God touches our lives in new and exciting ways when we are connected to each other one-on-one. That's when we encounter a God worth knowing.

As for No's. 2 & 3, yes we are committed to the stewardship of this beautiful, historic church building. But we do that to ensure there will always be an active, thriving faith community here. We hope to always be here serving in Christlike fashion, through programs like Cooking Matters, Project Shine, and the GenOn Youth Caravan, which this year has a strong missions component cleaning up after the recent flooding in Estes Park, CO.

And No's. 4 & 5: share God's love with one another and invite new people into planning and leadership roles. We do that. We are a very friendly and giving church, and we have new members on our committees and serving as Trustees, Deacons, and Session members.

This church does a lot that is right. If we are guilty of anything, it's ***trying to do too much***. That's how we risk losing our sense of fun and joy. So how do we keep this from happening? By looking at our church with new eyes, and being open to a little fun and joy in the process.

A kindergarten teacher asked the class, "What is the color of apples?" Most of the children answered red. A couple said green. But one student raised her hand and said white.

The teacher tried to explain that apples could be red or green or even golden. But never white.

The student was adamant, and finally she said, "Look inside."

We as a church have started to look at ourselves in new ways – as a church of personal relationships that don't always have to happen here in the church building, as a church reaching out in selfless service to our neighbors right here on this block, as a church not afraid of new ideas.

That's what the experts are saying about joyful, thriving churches. And the same can be said about joyful, thriving individuals. Think about what a difference it could make in your life to follow the same pattern of ***tending to your personal relationships***; focusing on Jesus; serving those in need; sharing God's love; and inviting new ideas and new people into your life.

Think about what that could mean, not only for your life, but for this world we live in. Think about what it would mean to have such a joyful sense of God's presence. Think about what it would mean to have people look at how you live your life and realize there truly is a God worth knowing. Amen.

Pastoral prayer

O God of truth and understanding, generation after generation you have listened patiently while your people questioned your love.

We, too, have doubted your love and judged you without knowing you. Awaken us to your presence that we may know through our own experience that you are faithful in caring for your creation.

We pray your care upon those most in need this day, those suffering from illness or disease, those grieving the loss of a loved one, those going without the basic necessities of life.

Let our lives bring a measure of compassion, encouragement, and provision.

We pray all this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**