



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Our Unknown God”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Acts 17: 22-28; John 14: 15-21

May 10, 2026

I have found myself, as we approach this Mother’s Day, increasingly thinking about the journey of parenting that Sharon and I have shared these past 20+ years. It is news to no one that parenting is a tumultuous, joyous, stressful, blessed, periodically thankless and yet remarkably inspiring journey that is ever-changing from one day to the next. From the earliest days of checking in on our babies to make sure they are breathing at night, to the ages of car-seats and diaper bags everywhere we look, to the pubescent years of angst, the teenage years of self-assured defiance, and into that young-adult era in which we increasingly bite our tongues as they endure those more grown-up problems that they want to (and in many cases need to) figure out for themselves – it just keeps going. The joys and challenges have their moments of highs and lows, but they don’t go away. They simply evolve from one year to the next. And we do our best to roll with them.

If there is anything of which I am most confident in that parental journey, however, it’s that we didn’t (and still won’t) get it all right. There are moments we could have handled better. There are circumstances that we could have approached alternatively. There are heartfelt decisions made in love and compassion that, in retrospect, may not have been the best choice to make. Every step of the way, however, Sharon and I have tried to maintain one fundamental principle. No matter the missteps... no matter the challenges faced... if the kids remain confident that we are there and on their side – if our home remains a place of safety and security for them in the face of life’s trials – then we’ve done our job. No matter what glitches may come along the way, if we remain a safe haven to which they can turn in the face of life’s adversities – that’s a win, and we’ll take it. And I share that on this Mother’s Day morning because I am convinced that this is precisely the point that Paul is trying to make about this God who stands with us each and every day!

But, let’s take a step back...

Acts 17 has Paul travelling through Greece, often running into challenges and resistance among the religious establishment of the time. The chapter starts with Paul in Thessalonica, up on the northern edge of the Aegean Sea, where Paul’s preaching is proving to be persuasive among some of the elites, which causes the Jewish leadership of the time to stir up a group of ruffians in the crowd to form a mob to chase Paul out the city. Paul and his counterpart make their way west to Beroea, where they are a bit more warmly received by the locals and, again, find their

preaching and teaching to be connecting with the people. Sure enough, word of that success makes its way back to the Jewish leaders in Thessalonica who, in turn, send their mobs on to Beroea to once again chase Paul out of town. This, then, is when Paul makes his way south to Athens and they find themselves in an entirely different circumstance.

In the 1st century, Athens was no longer the political powerhouse that it had been some 400-500 years earlier. It was still, however, in many ways the brains – the thought-center – of the culture. Stoics, Epicureans and other philosophical schools of thought were centered in Athens and there was a broad communal sense of wanting to explore, learn, and understand new things. There is genuine curiosity among the people as they ask to learn more from Paul. There is also, however, a tremendous diversity of theological perspective. As a polytheistic society filled with critically-minded inquisitors, the city was full of monuments and idols to the many gods worshipped by the people of the town. And among those monuments was one that was inscribed ‘Agnosto Theo.’ Agnosto – the same root as the contemporary word for ‘agnostic’ – in Greek means unknown, or perhaps more importantly, unknowable. And ‘theo’ means god. Literally, there is a monument in town inscribed to a god they openly proclaim to be unknown and, perhaps, unknowable.

That is what Paul is talking about here in Acts 17. *“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” (Acts 17:23b)* ‘The God who made everything.’ ‘The God is lord of heaven and earth.’ ‘The God who gives life and breath to all things.’ ‘The God in whom we live and move and have our being.’ The list goes on of these aspects of the divine that Paul proclaims to these philosophical thinkers in Athens. It is verse 27, however, that I find to be particularly compelling in the context of our reflections today. Starting in verse 26, Paul says of this God he is seeking to define for these people, *“From one ancestor he made all peoples 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 fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17: 26-27)*

There is a subtle manner, here, in which Paul points towards the underlying accuracy of their depiction of God. In talking about what they call an ‘unknowable god,’ Paul points out that the human endeavor on which humanity is sent is to fumble about in search of that God. Paul suggests that it is part of the divine scheme that the human condition is one that strives to understand that divine reality, and yet fumbles in doing so. Now, the reasons and purpose of that fumbling about can be argued, and it’s not my intent to dig into that today, but I do think that it is worth stopping for a moment and noting that Paul, in decrying this monument to an unknowable god is naming that, at least to some extent, God is unknowable. We will fumble about for God. We will at times find God. We will at times, not. We will at all times, however, fumble in our efforts in that pursuit. As much as Paul is trying to make this ‘unknown god’ known to these people, in doing so he owns that, ultimately, we will fumble about in that journey because certain elements of the truth of God will forever remain unknowable to the human condition.

But, and this is a big but... That’s not the end of the story. *“From one ancestor he made all peoples 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 fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.”
(Acts 17: 26-27)

I am not sure there is a more fundamental promise of our faith, at least for this earthly portion of the journey that we travel, than that!

Consider, if you will, the words of Jesus in John 14. These words put us back into that dialog that Jesus shares with his disciples just before his arrest. There are many commands that Jesus shares – promises that he declares – but here in John 14 he makes one thing abundantly clear.

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ 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.”

He will give you an advocate to be with you forever... He will be in you... I will not leave you orphaned... I am coming to you... You will see me... You will know that you are in me and I in you... In a handful of sentences Jesus makes this same fundamental point in six different ways, and it is precisely the point that Paul is echoing to the Athenians. That, indeed, God is never far from us!

Even Paul, as he made that speech in front of the Areopagus, couldn't deny that a part of humanity's relationship with God is fumbling about. There is a certain unknowable dynamic to God, and there is an undeniable frailty and faultiness to humanity. Our search to journey with God will be filled with its own fits and starts – highs and lows – joys and not so much! All too often, however, I've seen that inherent aspect of our fumbling relationship with God far too quickly lead to a false notion that God has somehow become absent from the picture. Our fumbling leads us to think that God has abandoned... or forgotten... or ignored... And, I get it. That's human nature.

Think about Jesus himself who, a matter of hours after making that promise of God's unfettered presence in the lives of the disciples, hung on the cross and cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.' There is an undeniable reality to the unknowable nature of God. There is an equally undeniable truth to the prospect that we will fumble about in our journey in trying to understand the Divine. And, there is an inescapable tendency within the human condition to feel, amidst that fumbling, that God has someone left us behind. Even Jesus got to that point! There is also, however, the promise that Jesus makes to the disciples... that Paul proclaims to the Athenians... that we see echoed countless times throughout the Biblical witness – that, no matter what our experience of the moment may be, God is never far from us!

As we approached this Mother's Day and I considered the fact that the next time we reach Mother's Day our oldest will be out of college and our youngest headed there, I couldn't help but think of that fundamental goal that Sharon and I have shared as parents. No matter the fumbling... no matter the strife... no matter the circumstance of the moment... if the kids know that we are there and on their side, and our home remains a safe place to which they can turn – that's a win. As much as some like to debate the anthropomorphizing mother/father language for God, I am invariably convinced that our parent God feels the same about us. No matter the fumbling... no matter the strife... no matter the circumstance of the moment... if we know that God is there, that God is on our side, and that God remains a safe place to which we can turn – for God, and for us – that's a win!