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Seeking Religious Understanding

John 14:4-11

Acts 17:19-32

What are all of you doing here this morning? Did you not get the word of warning about the coming of the end of the world yesterday? Some Christians expected the return of Jesus Christ who they believed would gather believers from the earth, called the Rapture, prior to God rendering final judgment upon all who are left behind. If attendance is low this morning, this might be one satisfactory explanation. For those of us who remain on earth, does it mean we missed the heaven train? One thing is certain. Many Christians will be seeking religious understanding of this theological claim of the Rapture as the only interpretation of Scripture.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus has a heart-to-heart talk with his disciples at the Last Supper in Jerusalem knowing that his death was imminent. Jesus seeks to assure them that his death will open the way for him to return to his Father and for God's Spirit of truth to empower them to carry on Jesus' ministry in amazingly new ways. This left the disciples confused. Thomas replies: "*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" Thomas is seeking religious understanding because he is not clear what Jesus means. Jesus replies: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.*" Jesus is instructing his disciples to keep their lives focused on trusting what they've seen and learned from him. Philip also is seeking religious understanding and more specific guidance as he says: "*Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.*" One can imagine Jesus smacking his head in bewilderment as he responds:

"Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The disciples seemed confused about Jesus' teachings and his ministry.

Are Christians any different today? Despite being baptized and confirmed in the faith of the Church, I think Christians still find themselves seeking religious understanding of their faith. The modern ecumenical movement that emerged in the early 20th century acknowledged this quest as the faith journey of all Christians as guided by the question: **What is the foundation of Christian faith that is the bond of unity for the Christian community?** Wilhelm Visser't Hooft (1st WCC General Secretary): Dialogue is "*a common struggle to arrive at a common mind about the truth that is in Christ.*" Condemning other Christians is neither the way for seeking religious understanding nor the way of Christian witness to others.

In the Book of Acts, Christian witness shifts from a conversation within Jewish culture to a cross-cultural encounter between Jewish and Hellenic cultures. During his second missionary journey in Greece, the apostle Paul arrives in Athens, the birthplace of Greek philosophy with a rich religious tradition of Greek gods and goddesses. Paul is invited to address the Athenians in front of the Areopagus, an elevated, open air site near the Acropolis for public debate. The Athenians are curious about Paul's teaching about the resurrection of the dead in saying: "*May we know what this new*

teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Paul begins by sharing his first impressions of Athens: *“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.”* He mentions the city’s temples dedicated to many gods. Paul then notes one interesting site: *“I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”* Paul says the “unknown god” is God the Creator of all that exists and who is the possession of no religion: *“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....”*

Paul seeks to bridge Greek philosophy to proclaim a religious truth. He claims that the pursuit of the knowledge of God cannot settle for an altar *“to an unknown god.”* Greek philosophy affirmed that all knowledge, including the divine, is a reflection of an absolute idea. Paul asserts that the knowledge of God is neither a concept nor an image created by artists’ imagination: *“... 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.”* In proclaiming the gospel, Paul quotes Greek philosophers and poets to connect with the Athenians. Their curiosity is the human quest seeking religious understanding. Paul affirms that God created humankind with a religious nature: *“... indeed God is not far from each one of us. 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.’”* Paul declares God as Creator and Father of humankind. Paul concludes his sermon by appealing to revelation as the source of religious knowledge. He asserts that the Creator God chose a particular righteous man to judge the heart of all human beings because this Creator God raised this man from the dead. Some people ridiculed Paul’s ideas. Others were curious to learn more about the resurrection of the dead. A few became believers.

Paul provides a model for how to relate to people in a religiously pluralistic world. Non-Christians seeking religious understanding ask Christians two key questions: **What does it mean to be a Christian?** and **What do Christians share in common with other religions?** It is interesting that Paul preached to the Athenians without quoting Scripture nor by mentioning the name of Jesus. He used different language that struck a chord of understanding. Example: Consider the anthem sung by the choir, *How Sweet the Sound*. The composer Mark Hayes writes about teaching in a local seminary in Brazil. While performing some of his gospel hymn arrangements for piano, a student asked him if he could play something in a “bossa” style that is indigenous to Brazil. The beloved hymn, *Amazing Grace*, played and sung in a different rhythm, reveals that God’s grace in Christ can resonate with the heartbeat of a person from a different culture.

In the 21st century, Americans find themselves living in a pluralistic culture of religious and ethnic diversity. The world is visible in the faces of our neighbors. In our everyday encounters with people who may hold different beliefs and values, do we believe that our faith compels us to scare the hell out of people? If our faith is grounded in the hope of the resurrection, then our Christian witness will communicate clearly when people understand that we do not believe in altars erected *“to an unknown god”* out of fear. It is important that we deepen our understanding of Christian faith in order to find new language to communicate what belief in Jesus means to us that is inviting for others to share what their religion means for their lives. In this way, we affirm the religious nature of our humanity in seeking religious understanding.

Christians are given wise counsel in 1 Peter 3:15-16a: *“... in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”* Therefore, as Christians, we can affirm that we believe in God who is Lord of heaven and earth and the Father of humankind. And as people of

Easter faith, we also can share the hope we have in Christ with our neighbor in a spirit of love and respect as Jesus taught us. To God be the Glory! Amen.