

Today's first reading tells us a unique story in the life of the Apostle Paul. He is in Athens, waiting for his ministry partners, Timothy and Silas, to meet him. As he looks around, he notices the large volume of idols all around him. He ends up in a conversation with some gentile philosophers about religion. They are interested in having an intellectual debate about his proclamation. They say to him, "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." (Acts 17:19b-20)

Paul has a choice in this moment. He could dig into his Jewish heritage and roots to explain Jesus' lineage and connection to King David. He could talk about how Jesus is the anointed one sent by God to redeem Israel...but none of that would have worked. These Greeks, these non-Jews, wouldn't have cared about any of it. Furthermore, these are *philosophers*. They had their own way of thinking about the world using logic and reason and any appeals Paul made would fall flat if not grounded or supported by philosophy.

Paul knows this—so he appeals to them on their own terms: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup>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." (17:22b-24) In other words, Paul chose to use the religious fervor already present in the Athenian context to connect with these folks. He tells them that this "unknown god" they had already been worshipping is, in fact, Jesus, this "new" God he'd been talking about. We might hear the word "unknown" and balk a little bit. We know our God!

...but we only know *some* of God. We only know what God has chosen to disclose. We cannot be arrogant enough to presume we know *all* of God. In many ways, our God remains unknown and invisible, except for the ways we have seen God revealed.

First, there is creation. In the beginning, the earth was a formless void and God's Spirit moved across the deep and formed order out of chaos. Everything was brought into being. And so, we see God in the creation around us: in the towering redwoods and tiny weeds; in huge mammals in the sea and on land and in the tiniest microbe; in each unique person we encounter every day. The beauty of the cosmos is evidence of God's work, one way in which we can begin to know our unknowable God.

God chose to do more, though. After creating everything, God realized that there must be another way to connect with humanity, to bring us all back into reconciled relationships...and so God chose to come among us. God took on human form and let us know the person of Jesus Christ. Through the life of Jesus, our God revealed more. In his ministry and death and resurrection, we glimpsed more of God's intention for us, of God's love for all, and for God's unending compassion and grace.

Even as God walked the earth, though, there was still a sense that more might be needed—that we might need to have just a little more revealed. Jesus, in his farewell discourse with his disciples—his last conversation with them before he is arrested and executed—Jesus tells the disciples that he will not abandon them. God will reveal Godself in yet another way: the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. Although God might be invisible after Jesus ascends back to heaven, God will continue to reveal God’s self and God’s will through the work of the Spirit.

Two of the ways this manifests for us is in our sacraments: baptism and communion.

Communion calls us to gather around this table together, to receive bread and wine, to share in a meal with one another. The pastor presiding blesses these elements. The bread is handed over, “The body of Christ, given for you.” In this congregation, wine is poured into a cup, “The blood of Christ, shed for you.”

Tangible things we can eat and drink. Words spoken, bodies performing actions, but it is not the efforts of our bodies that provide us with God’s presence and God’s nourishment: it is what God is doing *with* that bread and wine, *with* those bodies.

In baptism, those same bodies do a lot of things, as well. Oftentimes, we baptize infants or very young children who are unable to speak for themselves and so their parents will make some promises on behalf of them. They’ll promise to live among God’s faithful people, to nurture their child’s faith, to teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the 10 Commandments and the Creed, to care for others and to work for justice and peace. After the parents make these promises, or when older baptism candidates make them for themselves, the sponsors promise to do their part in equipping these new Christians to live a life of faith. Finally, the congregation will promise to support and pray for them in their new life in Christ.

After all this, we’ll profess our faith in God together. Then, they are baptized, by pouring water over their heads and blessing them. Later, they are anointed with oil and many congregations will give them a special candle to remind them to shine the light of Christ brightly for others. These are all things that we can see and touch and smell and hear. Our unseen God uses these tangible, physical elements so that God’s work might actually be *seen*.

Because, in actuality, the pastor doesn’t do anything in a baptism. Neither do the parents. Not the sponsors or the assembly, either. Certainly, the baptismal candidates themselves won’t be doing anything... No, even though hands might move and mouths might speak it is *God* acting—God revealing God’s love for us in claiming us as God’s own beloved children in baptism. These are just two of the ways God acts in our world, two of the ways God has *promised* to act in our world.

God does incredible things. God brings life out of death; light out of darkness; order out of chaos; joy out of despair; healing out of hurt; dancing out of mourning. God creates and imagines and heals and comforts and inspires and renews. God is constantly revealing

Godself in new and old ways so that we might have endless opportunities for a divine encounter.

And God does all of this because God has made us a promise. Jesus told his disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned.” We are not alone. We are not orphaned. We are not abandoned. Our God has come to us and continually comes to us, over and over again.

Through the scripture, the Word of God.

Through bread and wine, the Body and Blood of God.

Through communities of believers, the hands and feet of God.

Through water, the place of joining with God.

Through known and unknown ways, our God is revealed.

Amen.