

*“Our Children Are Teaching Us
About The ‘Unknown God’”*

Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:8-20, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

Part IV of IV in the sermon series
“THE First Church Family and
OUR First Church Family”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 6, May 17, 2020, dedicated to all the children of First Church and their parents, to Brynn Evelyn Jones, born on Mother’s Day, May 10, 2020, to Avery Jones on her second birthday, and to the memory of Joan Lebold who passed to eternal life, May 16, 2020 and always to the glory of God!

“Our Children Are Teaching Us About The ‘Unknown God’”

Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:8-20, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

Good morning. On this Sunday when we traditionally receive our Confirmands into the fullness of faith, I was thinking about all our children in the First Church family. We will celebrate the Confirmands two weeks from today – on Pentecost Sunday. Today’s sermon is a gift to all of us from the children of First Church as shared by their moms. Dads, please be listening closely to your children as they distill wisdom. With parental permission, I am sharing a picture of Avery on her knees in prayer. Avery is 2 today. Happy Birthday Avery. Please join me in the receiving the wisdom of our First Church children.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Have you ever found yourself in a room with really smart people who have a completely different take on life? They have a different approach, different philosophy, different training, different understanding. Their brilliance and creativity are expressed in very different ways. The synapses in their brains fire - differently. They “get” each other, but you are no match for them in their areas of creativity, brilliance and expertise. You might say, they are “different” from you.

For me, it would be like being at a convention of engineers. As I sit and listen, I have no idea what they are talking about. One man says to another, “*How is generic TKey interpreted in C# when using lambda notation?*” Without missing a beat, the second man responds, “*Why is the generic parameter TKey magically deduced (and to what?)? How did you deduce it to the actual type of the ID property?*” Now both are fully engaged. I watch their eyes light up. The energy at the table increases and this goes on and on while I just sit there and smile wondering what universe I have entered.

For the Apostle Paul in Acts 17, there must be some of this going on as he, a former Jewish Pharisee, now Christian convert and leading missionary for the budding Jesus movement, shows up in Athens, sitting Greek philosophers. He is in the Hall of Philosophy where Plato, Socrates and others taught and wrote. One philosopher quoting Socrates says, “*False words are not only evil themselves, but they infect the soul with evil.*” (let me repeat this). Another quoting Democritus declares, “*Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is just opinion.*” And each begins to expound to a small circle of men as they are off to the philosophical races!

Paul sits quietly observing their philosophical exchanges, points and counterpoints, and then when there is just enough airspace for

him to say something, Paul stands up and speaks to them frankly. He says, *“People of Athens, it is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, **TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS**. I’m here to introduce you to **this God** so you can worship intelligently, and know who you’re dealing with.”*

Paul goes on to speak of our God – The UNKNOWN God – to all the Athenians present. He says, Our God is creator of the Universe and everything herein. He tells them that our God transcends human life and doesn’t wait around for “human support” to be a presence in this world. He tells them that our God is the Lord of ALL Life, not only the creator, but the giver, the shaper, and sustainer of human existence and all life itself. Then he says, this “Unknown God” is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Pulling from Greek philosophy he offers an expression that all would know. He quotes Epimenides of Crete from the 6th Century BC, *“In him we live, and move, and have our being.”*

Even though Paul has come to Athens to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he never mentions his name. Instead, he closes by saying that the man whom God appointed for justice is the one whom God raised from the dead. There is scoffing and snickering when he says this. But a few Athenians are interested and come alongside Paul to learn more about Jesus. Sometimes you only change a few hearts and minds and that is okay.

1960 years have passed since Paul was preaching in Athens revealing “The Unknown God” to the Greek philosophers. And still, we find God being revealed to us each day. I find hope in the way that God is being revealed through our children – right here at First Church.

You have already seen the High Energy, in constant motion, two-year-old Avery on her knees in prayer. A God who can get Avery to her knees in the stillness of prayer, is a God I believe in and can praise all day long!

A few weeks ago, I shared the essence of a beautiful prayer video of Nolan, age 5, and Cami age 3 offering Jesus their nightly prayers. Nolan prays, *“Can you please Jesus, please take the virus away from me when I wake up. And take it all away. Take it all away from all the towns, all the towns. Take the sickness away from me and from the guys around us. Please Jesus do that. Amen.”* Sister Cami, at 3 adds, *“Jesus please take the Coronavirus away because I want to wake up in the morning and have it gone.”* These prayers were so heartfelt and so real, they went straight to the heart of God. I hear and see God’s presence in the prayers of Nolan and Cami.

When I asked parents to share stories of their toddlers, infants, children and teens and their connections to God, I received great replies. I asked where do you see God? Two teens responded this way... Mia said, *“I see God when I witness people standing up for what’s right, especially when they’re advocating for others.”* Matty said, *“I see God in people, in the way they served others who needed help on our mission trip.”* Thank you, Mia and Matty!

Donna is 10 years old. Way back in mid-March, she and her mother Denise were talking about the return of “essential workers.” She wanted to know why she couldn’t go to piano lessons, school, church, and dance class during the pandemic. Denise told her that they only wanted people to be in contact when it was necessary and only those who kept basic services going and allowed us to live. **Donna said that she understood essential workers for living,**

but we needed everyone to have a life. Donna is wise beyond her years – a sign (to me) of God alive and well in her. Thanks Denise and Donna.

Kristen wrote to me, “*Dominick’s 6th birthday is coming up on May 25th. On May 23rd Dom is going to have a drive-by birthday party and we’re asking families to bring a personal hygiene item for Gladden House which they’ll be able to drop in a bin as they drive by.*” Whenever there is a “friend birthday party” for Dom, they ask friends to bring a donation rather than a gift. When Kristen asked Dominick what he wanted to ask his friends to bring this year, he said “*food for the people who don’t have any because of Coronavirus.*”

Gladden House needs hygiene items though, so he was happy to switch to that. Dom prays every night and most nights his prayer is that no one gets Coronavirus or the people who have Coronavirus get better soon. He has also prayed lately that people who are sad would not be sad anymore. He is struggling with not being able to see his family and friends, but he does his best to understand. The other day he said, out of the blue, “*I know I can only have one friend at my birthday party and that’s okay mama.*” He cries sometimes and says “*I want coronavirus to go away*” but he’s being strong and we’re enjoying family time. I’ve been astounded by his resiliency, which is typical of most children... wonders they are.

He hasn’t left our home other than a quick car ride where he didn’t get out of the car, since March 13th. And other than a few nightmares and a few crying spells, he’s been fine. We’re so fortunate.

Thank you, Kristen and Thank You, Dominic for your faith, resiliency and love. And as one of the Successors of Washington

Gladden, thank you for thinking of Gladden Community House for your birthday. I am sure Dr. Gladden is smiling from heaven on your generosity and kindness. Happy (Early) Birthday Dom!

Whitney shared stories of Julia, now four (and in the midst of welcoming her new baby sister). Whitney wrote, Julia has said that she wants to be good like Jesus (though her dad thinks that she may have been angling for a cookie).

When Julia was three, she loved to play with our mini nativity set at Christmas. Her grandparents took her to a life size nativity near their house and she skipped right up to it and said “*Hey guys*” like they were old friends. When we visited the Cleveland Museum of Art that year, she was most interested in art depicting Jesus and Mary.

I love Julia’s ease with the Holy Family and her love and connections to Jesus – whether she is angling for cookies or not. Thank you, Julia.

Blake is 4 1/2. When Amanda asked him this week what he knows about God, Blake replied, “*He’s there all the time for us.*” Profound. Perfect. True. Thank you, Blake for reminding us that “*God is there all the time for us.*”

Christina sent me a great story about her son Logan. Last fall when she was doing a thanksgiving craft with Logan (5 at the time), she asked him what he was most thankful for and right away without a moment’s hesitation he replied “*God!*” She wrote, “*It touched my heart that at such a young age when he could have said anything (like toys or videos games) he has such a heart for Jesus that that was the first thing that came to his mind.*” Logan, I miss you and your sisters and brother and mom and dad. I hope to see you soon. Thank you for your love of God.

Lee sent in thoughts from Spencer and Wesley. Spencey is 3 and Wesley is 4. They come to the 9 a.m. service and help serve communion every time. Spencer, said, *“God is church and I love church. I love to carry the bread basket.”* Wesley said, *“God and Jesus are good. They love and help heal cuts. That’s what God is and what Jesus did. I love communion.”* Lee concludes, my all-time favorite was from Wesley when he was 3.... *“why do I have to wear clothes to church, doesn’t Jesus love to be naked?”* One can only guess Wesley, that when Jesus was three, he loved to be naked. Thanks Lee, Spencer, and Wesley. I love your wisdom and Wesley, I love your question for the ages about Jesus and nakedness.

I save the youngest for last. Lauren wrote of Eddie. *“Eddie’s a little too young to have knowingly shared any insights about God, but here is a story I love that you may be able to use in some future setting. When Eddie was a little over a year old, I brought him to the 9:00 service by myself. I was having a tough time trying to entertain him during the service without distracting everyone else. The time came for communion and, as I was served, he snatched the bread out of my hand, ate it and ran toward the (communion table) enthusiastically doing the sign language sign for “more.” I had to chase after him, mortified, whispering that we don’t really do “seconds” of communion.*

Now, it could be that he just loves a good piece of bread, but I like to think that he saw those around him participating in a deeply meaningful ritual that brought them into communion with God. And that, with one taste, he felt God’s nearness and just wanted “more.” I hope that I can be a little more unabashed like him in seeking more and more of God.” Thank you, Lauren, for this beautiful truth. Thank you, Eddie, for wanting more of the bread, more of the goodness of God!

I had a thought as you were writing and I was collecting these insights into God and the nature of life and faith. Maybe God has given us this “Stay at Home” time to get to know each other better. While we are attempting to teach our children from home, maybe the real teachers right now are our children. Maybe they are unknowingly teaching us about the “Unknown God.” Perhaps we need to listen a little more closely. They are precious because, in their innocence, is wisdom, and grace, and love. On those days when you as parents, are feeling overwhelmed, think of all the grandparents who can’t be close to their grandchildren right now. Then, think of all the times you have been apart from your children and you longed to hold them in your arms. This is sacred time. Listen closely. Hold them close. Teach them well. But, learn from them about God – and what really matters in this life.

Remember, Paul told the Athenians, “*I will show you the Unknown God.*” And remember, Blake told the folks in Columbus and at First Church, “*God’s there all the time for us.*” Thanks be to God for all of our teachers - especially the little ones and the younger ones.

May God keep you safe. Keep you sane. Keep you healthy. Amen.

