

“The God They Don’t See”

Sunday, May 10, 2026

- Acts 17:22-31
- John 14:15-21

INTRODUCTION

In college, I was a nursing home chaplain. I wasn’t credentialed with any Clinical Pastoral Education training. I had simply asked my local church pastor where I might be of help. He recommended me for the position to a friend of his, a nursing home chaplain, who needed some help due to failing health. After a brief interview with him at Lackey Manor Baptist Nursing Home in Oklahoma City, OK, I was tasked with leading two midweek worship services every week, complete with a bulletin, liturgy, a sermon, and singing. A volunteer at the nursing home played the piano to accompany the singing. Then, before and after the service, I met with long-term residents of the facility and just talked with them.

Leading the services, there were about 25-30 residents in wheelchairs. A few of them were coherent; many more seemed as if they were not. At first, I wondered if I was making any difference being there. It felt like I was wasting my time. But another part of my ministry there had me meet and talk with the residents in their rooms. At first, I would look at them in their beds and wonder if anyone was even home, if you

know what I mean. For a few others, they were vibrantly awake and aware—and more than a little lonely.

After a few months, though, I began to see and experience them differently. Little by little, I noticed that they were indeed present, just not as noticeable as I had first experienced. I also learned that many of them had been there for years. Some of them occasionally saw their children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. Most of them didn't. At first, I felt completely out of my element and had no idea how to minister to them or even what to say. But after some time, I realized it didn't really matter what I said; the fact that I showed up meant everything. And they would say so. My heart broke for many of them. But I came to realize that God can be at work in someone's life, and I don't necessarily see it—until I do.

T/S I found my experience at the nursing home shaped by love—my love for them and the residents' love for me. I was there for nearly 4 years, and it was one of my favorite experiences in life. Jesus talks about this kind of love relationship in our Gospel text.

JOHN TEXT

In John 14:15–21, Jesus offers a vision of faith grounded not in abstract belief but in relationship and practice, Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” For many of us, “commandments” can sound rigid or exclusionary. But here, they are

inseparable from love. Jesus is not laying down a legal code; he is describing a way of being shaped by love—love that is active, embodied, and visible in how we live with one another. The question is not, “Do you believe the right things?” but “Does your life reflect love in motion?”

Jesus then promises “another Advocate,” the Spirit of truth, who will remain with and within the community. This is a powerful assurance: the presence of the divine will continue as a living, guiding force. This passage reminds us that we are not left alone to navigate complex moral and spiritual questions. The Spirit is still at work—nudging, challenging, comforting, and calling us and others forward. It also suggests that truth can be something we grow into—like I experienced in the nursing home.

There is also an important distinction here between the “world” that cannot receive the Spirit and those who can. Rather than reading this as exclusionary—you know, “us” versus “them”, we might understand it as a kind of awareness. The Spirit’s presence is not absent from the world, but it is often unrecognized. To “know” the Spirit is to be attuned to it—to cultivate a sensitivity to where love, justice, and compassion are already moving. This aligns with an understanding of faith that seeks God in and outside the church, in acts of kindness and in the quiet resilience of everyday people.

Ultimately, this passage circles back to love as both the starting point and the outcome of faith. Love becomes the lens through which we encounter God. And this love is not passive—it draws us into deeper connection with God and with one another. This is the invitation: to trust that in choosing love—especially when it is costly or complicated—we are participating in the very life of God.

T/S The Apostle Paul understands, too, because it is love that motivated him to share his faith in such a difficult environment. But Paul takes a clever approach that mattered to those who would listen.

ACTS TEXT

Paul’s speech at the **A-rop-a-gus** is one of the most fascinating moments in the early Christian story, thanks to the clever and careful way he makes his point. Paul stands in a city full of competing philosophies, devotions, and interfaith recognition. Instead of condemning what he sees, he begins with curiosity: “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” That opening matters. Paul doesn’t start with judgment; he starts with observation and even a kind of respect. This is a crucial posture in a pluralistic world. We are surrounded by many expressions of meaning-making—spiritual, secular, scientific—and the invitation here is not to withdraw or attack, but to engage thoughtfully and generously.

Paul's reference to the altar "to an unknown god" reflects an acknowledgment that even in a culture rich with ideas, there is still mystery, still something beyond full comprehension. Paul doesn't claim that the Athenians are entirely wrong; instead, he suggests that what they are reaching toward unknowingly is what he has come to name.

But don't forget, this situation was far from ideal. Paul had come into the city and was heartbroken over the various idols around him. His concern drove him to the local synagogues and inspired him to speak with God-fearing Gentiles.

Then, he stepped out in faith in the public square and began to talk to the local philosophers and Stoics. They were both amused and offended by his talk of a different understanding of a God who loves us. They certainly chided him about the value of a sacrificial death and laughed at the idea of a resurrection. But they were curious, and the way Paul engaged them had them wanting to talk more with him. He wasn't offensive, but he also had a heart for what he was saying.

The text says that some were offended but others were inspired. He even had converts among some of these philosophers. I love the way he engaged them because he did it with love and conviction.

CONCLUSION

Truth be told, some people can see and understand God when we engage them with respect and kindness. When we're self-righteous and

mean-spirited, or think our truth is more important than their truth, that's when things can get ugly.

But, it's important to also know that not everyone will respond well. Some will be angry, others will be offended, and some may be dismissive. But, for those who understand and need the love you share, it'll bring them light and love when they need it most.

For those with an open mind, as our texts beckon for us today, new insights and a warm welcome awaits. For when we share the love of God with others, that love can break forth into the human experience and bring new life. It can open the eyes of the blinded. That happened to me when I began to see God in the men and women of the Lackey Manor Baptist Nursing Home. Once that happened, I also saw new opportunities to minister to them and be blessed by them.

May God open your eyes to the many ways we can see God.

Amen.