

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Son of God, our risen Savior, Jesus the Christ, amen.

It's good to be back home after taking a long overdue vacation. We went on a cruise and stopped at Jamaica, the Grand Cayman Island, and in Cozumel Mexico. We did some sight seeing and had a great time relaxing onboard the biggest ship I've ever been on. We took a lot of pictures and made a lot of memories we will never forget.

In our scripture reading for this morning Saint Paul has some free time while in the Greek city of Athens. He was in Athens waiting for his missionary colleagues, Timothy and Silas, to arrive. Athens was the home of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, as well as many other philosophers. It had formerly been the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of democracy. By the time Paul visited the city, Athens was 400 years past its prime. Paul did what anyone visiting such a historic city might do if they had a few days to spare before continuing his missionary journey, he became a tourist. Paul visited all the historical places and noticed all the altars that had been built to honor and worship their Greek and now increasingly Roman gods. As the apostle walked around the city he saw the gods of Athens, the idols that were being worshipped. One of the ancient writers tells us that at this time there were 30,000 gods in Athens! Many of these statues have survived. With a simple Google search you can see copies of them as samples of

ancient art. Paul recognized these weren't merely objects of art, but were actually gods being worshipped by the people of Athens.

I can't even imagine having 30,000 gods. How in the world did they keep them all straight? That's like having almost 100 separate religious holiday celebrations every day! If you tried to appease each and every god, there would simply be no time to fit them all in. I know some people don't like it if we even go longer than one hour on a Sunday. Imagine the time it would take just to thank each and every god for their blessings. I'm pretty sure it would take over an hour every day... In one single temple, the Pantheon, the Greeks had statues to 12 of the most popular Greek gods.

I wonder how many gods we worship on a daily basis today. I know people who have developed a permanent curvature of their spine as a result of praying to their cell phone, tablet, or computer screens all day and half the night long. I've had times in my life when I put my career and my job, ahead of everything else. Lots of people fall into that trap of worshipping their jobs and careers. I've also been guilty of putting my family, my wife, my children, and grandchildren first in my life. I know I'm not alone in that particular idol worship either... I could go on and on, but I'm pretty sure you get my point. We might not build temples and erect statues to our gods, but we worship them just the same.

Polls have shown the fastest growing and now the largest demographic when asked about their religion or faith is Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNRs). SBNRs now comprise over 24 percent of the population. That's slightly larger than the Catholic Church in America! I've been thinking about our friends and neighbors who identify as SBNRs a lot lately. At first I felt a sense of outrage that so many were falling away from my beloved Church. Now, as I've listened to Saint Paul, I noticed his approach. He too started out with a sense of "deep distress" Luke tells us. What Paul did in response to that distress is what we can all learn from. I might have gone out in front of those folks and tried to convince them how wrong they were for worshipping false gods. That's not how Paul approached the issue. Instead of pointing out the error of their ways, he compliments them on their religious fervor. He tells them he's noticed all the wonderful tributes they have to all their gods and so he knows they must be very religious people. He then begins to talk about this one statue to an "Unknown God." He uses one of their own religious symbols to include them into the living almighty God's story. It seems totally appropriate to me that Paul would be able to use one of the most, if not the most, insignificant of all the 30,000 Greek and Roman gods in vogue at that time to make his point and to include so many people into God's Story.. God always chooses the least and the least likely to use in miraculous and mighty ways. So, this "Unknown God" becomes known through the preaching of this man Paul.

If I and all of us can learn something from Paul, it's this. Let's not be quite so quick to judge others, but to listen to them and then tell our story or rather God's Story through us. For example, in the case of all those Spiritual But Not Religious folks, perhaps instead of seeing them as fleeing our beloved Church, maybe we can reach them by complimenting them on their search for meaning and purpose in life. Then you can open a conversation about how the living God became a real life flesh and blood human being to guide us, to be an example for us, and most importantly, to give his life for us out of love and out of God's great and amazing grace. We can tell them how God has given us a purpose and meaning for life. That we might worship Him and serve Him by serving our neighbors and the least of these our brothers and sisters. You see if someone admits to being spiritual then we share something in common with them. We're all seeking life's meaning and a purpose that makes us want to get up out of bed yet another day... We can build on that foundation and possibly convince them that our God does in fact fill that emptiness they feel in their lives. Spiritual But Not Religious people are in really seekers. They know there's more to life than what meets the eye, but they haven't made the commitment to any one specific set of doctrines or beliefs. On face value alone I would say these folks are ripe for the picking. They're probably even in your own family. I'm not asking you to stand up on the Mars Hill in Athens, that site named in honor of the Greek god Ares, the

god of war, to discuss religious doctrine, but we can all build up someone we already know and love who also admits or by their actions show us they're Spiritual, But Not Religious. It might even be your own children... If any of you have already had this kind of discussion with someone in your family or circle of friends, I'd like to hear how it went. If you aren't too embarrassed, please talk to me about your experience. Maybe I'll learn from what you're doing and maybe we can both do better at talking about our marvelous God in the future.

May the spirit of our God, who may be unknown to so many, stir us up to boldly talk about our faith and our love of the one creator God without shame and without worrying about what others will think of us. O God of Israel and God over all the universe, help us know you and love you enough to talk about where your story and my story come together. Help us to make Christ Known in every thought word and deed. Amen.