

All We Have in Common

May 10, 2026

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Some of you may know this, but as part of my training to become a priest I had to complete one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education – which is 400 hours of working as a chaplain typically in a hospital or other clinical setting

I completed my CPE unit at Rhode Island Hospital in Providence and if I haven't told you about my very first patient visit with my mentor to a Catholic woman seeking a religious medal please get me to tell the story at coffee hour

But the story I'm thinking about this morning was my time spent with another family

An older gentleman and his wife had been on a cruise when he suffered a stroke. He was airlifted to Rhode Island hospital from the ship because it was the closest hospital with the appropriate level of care

They were from the Netherlands and their adult daughter had flown in to be with her mom as they navigated the gentleman's care and recovery

Thankfully he was okay – the stroke was not too severe – though he would live with some significant long-term effects

They were asked if they wanted a chaplain to visit them and had indicated that they weren't particularly spiritual but if there was someone who was more humanist that they would welcome a visit

My advisor was like "Amanda, you go to seminary in Berkeley, CA – can you visit them?"

"Of course! Send the Berkeley hippy Lutheran, got it!"

I spent many days visiting with the daughter who was very grateful to connect and also spent a bit of time with the mom and father

There was one time I was in the room with all three of them when a neurology resident walked in to share some test results

He looked at me and said “who is this?” the daughter introduced me as one of the hospital’s chaplains and he said “why? I told you he wasn’t dying!”

I was so mad – I really wanted to say “why are you listening to him? he’s just a resident, you should ask for a *real* doctor.”

Diminish me in my work – I’ll diminish you in your work – that’s the Christian way, right? Sheesh Amanda!

But, I was so angry and in a hospital setting that already diminished the work of those of us who were there to provide care but not in a medical way – even though studies show that faithfulness or religiousness can positively impact our ability to heal! – his comment made me feel so insignificant and worthless

Ultimately, I know I was able to provide good care to this family and I realize that he, too, wanted to do the same: provide good care

He was coming to offer “good news” in the form of interpreting a lab or test result

And, I was coming to offer “good news” in the form of holy human connection

We just spoke past each other while trying to offer, ultimately, the same thing

We do a lot of this in the world, speak past each other when, ultimately, we’re seeking the same thing

As faithful people in the state of Maine, it is more likely that you will encounter people who *don't* believe or participate in a certain faith tradition than you will encounter folks who do – Pew Research puts us as the 49th most religious state¹

So if you're ever having conversations with someone about something and your faith or going to church comes up, it's very likely you're talking to someone who doesn't share that faith or practice and you might have that experience of talking past each other on a matter

I know many of you have told me you have friends who question - even if politely - why you go to church and those conversations are hard

Similarly, but in a different way, being part of a more progressive Christian denomination in a country where the “voice of Christianity” that is most often shared or heard in our media is a very conservative voice that sounds totally foreign to what you know and believe can make it feel like even the Christian views espoused in a conversation are talking right past you even though you share the tradition!

Sharing who we are and what we believe is a very vulnerable and scary experience sometimes

But, ultimately, I think there is something that we and our non-practicing humanist neighbors *and* the White Christian Nationalists in the media and the neuro residents at Rhode Island Hospital have in common: first – we're human! And second – we seek to make meaning of and in our lives and we desire community with whom to share our lives

We may often talk past each other while we're doing it – coming at this from different sides or different practices or different perspectives which

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/09/16/how-religious-is-your-state/?selectedState=ME>

can cause tension, friction, or conflict but I think we often are seeking really similar things

In the first lesson this morning which is from the book of Acts which is in the New Testament not in the Hebrew Bible, we hear the story of Paul standing up in a foreign place and talking to a foreign people about his faith

As you likely know, Paul was pretty good at this – he kind of made a name for himself at being good at this hence the inclusion of so many of his letters in our Bible

When you listen to his speech this morning you hear that what Paul does in this speech to the Athenians is he finds and leans into that which they hold in common and he honors it

And, that which they hold in common this time at first doesn't sound like it's something in common at all: "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.'"

When I first read this I thought, "oh here we go, Paul is going to lean into them for that one! An unknown God? really?"

But, I'm wrong! Paul looks at this altar and finds connection.

Jeremy Williams, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School in TX, notes in his commentary that "Paul understands his God as synonymous with the Unknown God. Although for Acts, God is not unknown to Paul...it is significant to linger with the idea of Paul's God, Jesus' God, Acts' God as being unknown. It is worth considering what the Athenians had right in seeing the divine as in some ways unknowable. The transliteration of the Greek behind 'to the unknown' (agnōsto) is etymologically connected to agnostics, who affirm that they have questions

about God, God's role in the world, and God's role in their lives. This passage affirms that Unknown God is indeed a name for the God of Acts."²

Paul knows God deeply, and Paul knows that God is also unknowable in many regards

I used to tell my youth at my first call in CT that as they grow up and go to churches, if they ever went to a church where the minister claimed to have all the answers to faith run far, far away!

Every Christian – I think – has a little agnosticism in them whether we realize it or not

Agnosticism being the idea that we can't fully know all of who God is or if God is

For some, our agnosticism – our inability to fully know – might evoke fear and cause us to cling to fundamentalism

For some, our agnosticism brings a comfort in being able to let go of our need for certainty and to exist more in the gray areas of our faith

Paul walks through town, sees this altar to an unknown God and rather than scoffing at this and mocking the Athenians for their lack of faith, Paul walks through town, sees this altar to an unknown God and recognizes something of himself

So, Paul, in his speech, starts with that connection – we have something in common: our humanity and our belief in an Unknown God, we are more alike than you might think – and then he goes on: and let me find the ways to share with you what I do believe

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-1722-31-6>

Mikeal Parsons, a Religion professor at Baylor University, notes that “Paul’s Areopagus speech is sometimes unfairly criticized: 1) for lacking explicit citations to Scripture, which led 2) to the speech’s failure to win converts among the Athenians.”³

If you ask me, it takes a certain amount of hubris – or maybe fear – to think that we can critique others in how they do or don’t express their faith – especially the great St. Paul!

But, Dr. Parsons points out that if you “peek at the very end of the story...while some of Paul’s audience did mock him (17:32a), others promised to hear him again (17:32b), and still others ‘joined him and believed’ (17:34). So goes the proclamation of the Gospel!”

You don’t hit a homerun every time you step up to the plate!

Our conversations with our non-practicing humanist neighbors or the White Christian Nationalists in the media or neuro residents in the hospital might not be thick with scripture citations and they may not convert anyone to our belief – or they might! So goes the proclamation of the gospel!

But, we are in fact equipped for these conversations not because we can quote certain scripture from memory or regurgitate the lessons from our confirmation classes – we are equipped if we recognize first and foremost that we have so much more in common with the person or persons to whom we are speaking than we do that separates us

We are humans seeking to make meaning in our lives and to find community with whom to share it

May the Spirit, the great Advocate, the Unknown God fill us and guide us to deeper connections, amen!

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-1722-31-5>