

Sermon: Atop The Areopagus

Scripture: Acts 17:22-31

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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The Apostle Paul who wrote and passed on the first words written by the followers of Jesus, when it was still a Jewish sect, was not one of the 12 Jewish disciples of Jesus who accompanied Jesus through his earthly life but rather he was a devout conservative Jew who believed Jesus and his followers were a danger to the tradition and needed to be stamped out, especially as the Jesus followers seemed undeterred by his execution.

Paul oversaw the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the faith, holding the jackets of the people who threw the stones. Paul was on his way to find, capture and persecute more followers of Jesus when he had a profound religious experience that knocked him to the ground, blinded him, and he heard a voice say - "Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me?" Paul asked who it was - "I am Jesus the one you are persecuting. Get up off the ground, go into the city, and you will be told what to do." So Paul goes into the city to the very people he was looking for in the first place but blinded and vulnerable. The disciples of Jesus who received him were not a little stunned because they knew exactly who this dangerous man was, but they received him nonetheless, prayed over him to give him his sight back and Paul became one of them... and not just one of them, but in fact the most vocal, the most influential of all the followers of Jesus.

Paul was Jewish. He was a Roman citizen. And he was highly educated and so spoke Greek as well and because he was a bit over-the-top passionate about anything he took on, he was the perfect person for the mission, for spreading word of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

And so began Paul's missionary journeys all over the Mediterranean world. Supposedly he traveled in all over 10,000 miles in the 15 or so years of his mission, encountering strangers and friends, welcome and hostility, fledgling churches and others he helped form. He wrote letters to his friends and to these churches all during his travels when he heard news of their joys and their struggles and these letters form a good portion of our New Testament, where we learn how the fledgling church grappled with who they were and how they understood Jesus and their purpose.

In the scripture read this morning we catch a glimpse of Paul in the midst of his missionary journey having swung through the intellectual cradle of western civilization, Athens, Greece. Tracy and I ended our European travels there at the end of my sabbatical last fall. Athens is quite a city bustling and modern with ancient ruins all over the place. This is me having just done a pirouette in front of the Parthenon. **(SLIDE)**

But Paul wasn't exactly pirouetting around Athens (darken slides) rather he was getting himself into trouble arguing the case for Jesus. It was a significant moment in the early days of the Spirit's work because it's the first glimpse we get of this way of Jesus encountering the wider Greco-Roman world and coming face to face with their mythologies and philosophies and practices. Paul being Paul, a little more arrogant than he probably had the right to be, winds his way through the streets of Athens, eyes the great Acropolis in the distance, and climbs the nearby hill called the Areopagus. **(SLIDE** This is us standing atop the Areopagus with the Parthenon in the background.) This was the place where philosophers and religious folk at the time gathered to discuss and argue about profound ideas of life and meaning, looking like this supposedly in the time of Paul. **(SLIDE)** Areopagus is Greek for the great rock of the god Ares, or Mars in

Latin, who is the god of war. As the myths tell it, the rock was where Ares was put on trial by the other Olympian gods for killing Poseidon's son because his son had assaulted Ares' daughter, Alcippe. In the end Ares was acquitted by the other gods because he was defending his family.

So it was there that Paul stood on top of the hill and said "Men of Athens, I see you are very religious in all things and you have this altar to an unknown god, but I am here to make the unknown god known to you and to explain how He is the only and true God." And Paul goes on to speak of God as known in Jesus Christ to these people steeped in Greek mythology and versed in the philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Where Paul stands to speak of Jesus offer contrast enough. He's on, the rock of the god of war, Ares, and behind him is Athena's temple the Parthenon, (**CLICK**) Athena being the goddess of warfare and wisdom (**CLICK**) born, if you remember your Greek mythology, from the forehead of her father Zeus after he had devoured her mother, Metis, while she was pregnant with Athena (there's my nod to Mother's Day). In the other direction is the sanctuary of the Eumenedes or the furies, the primordial beings of vengeance, (**SLIDE**) gods who were formed from the drops of a bloody battle between Cronus and Uranus which I won't be more graphic than that or we'll have to rate our youtube video "R". And also nearby the temple of Theseus, (**SLIDE**) the warrior who slayed the minotaur along with other violent exploits.

This is where Paul stands amidst temples to all these gods (**SLIDE**, back to title slide) to speak of the God revealed by Jesus Christ, a poor Jew who told his disciple to put away their sword and allowed himself to be crucified, the one who died a criminal's execution and rose again in love. Do you hear that contrast? The true God, Paul says, is not one of the

number of Olympian gods, vying for power and favor, served by human hands, giving good things to those who please them and bad things to those on their wrong side, but the God who created all things and gives them all life, every nation and every living thing. Yahweh God is the power by whom through whom and in whom all live and move and have their being. And the great desire of this Yahweh God, Paul says in verse 27 “He made all peoples and set them in place so that they would search for Him”. And this God for whom they would search would not hide from them or make it a game or a contest where some win and others lose, this God, the true God would come to us to make Godself known.

Unlike the gods of Greek mythology where the focus was themselves and their power and exploits and egos, this God, the true God, pours Himself out to his creation and makes Himself vulnerable in hopes of receiving our love in return. This is what Paul was professing. This is what Jesus had done, what our faith proclaims? It is not THIS (**SLIDE, CLICK** image of Theseus) as the image of God it is THIS (**CLICK**, Image of Jesus crucified). It's radical and shocking and beautiful. Even today. We've had 2000 years to digest this and still it is radical and shocking and beautiful. And right now we have men in the highest offices of our land who are more committed to the spirit of the gods of Olympus, their power and violence, see themselves as a Theseus or Ares figure than they are to the God revealed through the Jewish people initially and then through Jesus and his followers, the one who allowed himself to be crucified and only returned forgiveness out of love, the one described more like this (**SLIDE, CLICK**, image of a Hen). But let us not let ourselves off the hook by being scandalized by our leaders, for we too have our idols that we bend our knees to, idols of fame and fortune, idols of success and accomplishment,

idols of health and beauty, of technology and convenience, idols of nation and even religion itself can be a distorted idol that distorts the revelations of the true God, known in the crucified and risen person of Jesus Christ, who cares for the least, the lost, the last, and the losers. The mother hen gathering in her checks. Sorry, it's no cooler than that... but it's as amazing as that! (**CLICK** to black screen for rest of sermon)

And to the Epicureans and the Stoics, the philosophers who dismissed the superstitious mythologies of the day and who also gathered atop the Areopagus to hear Paul speak, Paul's words did not leave them unchallenged but also scandalized many of them with this notion that God was a personal presence, a God of love. The Greek philosophers at the time mostly held to a divine impersonal principle of life, not a Creator God of love who was involved and cared. To the philosophers the point was seeking knowledge, virtue, reason, right thinking, but Paul proclaimed it was about seeking God, the author of life, and becoming obedient and faithful unto Him, as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. For them it was a mental category, a calculus for how to live right. For Paul it was a relationship. Think about the love of a mother to her child. And that is a better way to envision and approach the Creator of the Universe, than a divine impersonal principle to which we must conform our lives in order to get it right and reap the benefits. We still of course want to seek knowledge and virtue and right thinking, but it is a very different thing to do so out of love and devotion to one who loves us rather than trying to grab ourselves by the bootstraps and pulling ourselves up and into right living of some abstract principle. That leads to pride and grasping for power, while the relationship we seek with God leads to love.

It really is a beautiful thing, this faith of ours, when seen and heard proclaimed from atop all our idols and philosophies and ideologies, the God of Jesus Christ, the one who came to love and save. Praise be to the Lord!