

Easter 6 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 17, 2020

Acts 17:22-31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I must make a full disclosure for this sermon. My ideas depend almost entirely upon an extraordinary commentary that I read by a colleague whom I have never met, Philip Ruge-Jones, an associate pastor at our sister congregation, Grace Lutheran Church, in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Thank you, Pastor Ruge-Jones.

In our first reading today, the apostle Paul speaks to the Athenians. Athens— the cradle of Western civilization. More than 20 towns in the United States are named Athens. By the time Paul speaks in Athens during the first century of the common era, Plato and Aristotle had been dead for about 400 years, and Athens was well past its prime, and was now a province in the Roman Empire. Still, the Greek ideals were adopted by the Romans. The Greek culture and its gods were adopted by the Romans. And the Greek language was still widely used, sometimes more than Latin, to the extent that the New Testament— all of which was written and which describes events under Roman rule— the New Testament was entirely written in Greek, not Latin.

Our first reading today tells us that Paul was in the Areopagus. In the King James Version, it is called Mars' Hill. The Greek God of War was Ares. And his hill in Athens was called the *Areopagus* in Greek. Him being Ares. And when the Greek gods were adopted by the Romans, Ares was given the Latin name, Mars. So Areopagus is the Greek name for the place where Paul was. Mars' Hill is the Roman name for the place where Paul was.

This story involves Paul speaking to a certain kind of audience, different than any kind of audience that Jesus ever spoke to, as far as we know. This is an audience of what we would call pagans. Virtually all Gentiles in the Mediterranean world had religions. Different than the God of Israel, who was a single God, in a monotheistic religion, and who had bound himself to a specific people, the Jews. So Paul, who is a Jewish convert to Christianity, is speaking to outsiders who are neither Jewish nor Christian. Much of what Paul writes in the Bible, and says in the book of Acts, and the sermons of Stephen the Deacon and Peter the Apostle are all Christian messages posed to a Jewish audience. Seeking to explain Jesus in terms of the Law, prophets, and writings. And that would have been Paul's normal world. The Jewish matrix. But the Athenians are not part of the Jewish matrix.

This is the first lesson we learn from the first reading. Sometimes we have to share the Christian message outside of our own matrix, outside of our own religion. And on the outside we can't use the reference points that we use on the inside. The most important insider reference that we use all the time is the Bible. I'm preaching on the Bible right now. Because you value the Bible, and because I value the Bible. It's a shared reference point for those of us on the inside. But on the outside, the Bible may not carry much authority at all. If an outsider asks you why you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and you reply, "Because the Bible says so," then the next question the outsider will pose is, "And how do you know the Bible is telling the truth?"

Paul didn't have that problem in Athens. Instead of quoting his Bible, he quoted their poets and made appreciative reference to their monuments. "*In him we live and move and have our being.*" Such a beautiful line. From the poet Epimenides. "For we too are his offspring." From the poet Aratus. Both of those poets, by the way, were writing about Zeus. But Paul appropriates that language in a way that speaks to a near universal human sense of God. It was in the female womb that each of us was first able to live and move and have our being. And Paul is proposing to this pagan audience that our sense that there is something more— a greater life force that is akin to the womb that bore each of us— a transcendent life force in whom we live and move and have our being— is the force that raised Jesus from the dead. For any who have a sense that we are all children of god, of *some* god, that we are that god's offspring, Paul says that this is the God who sent Jesus, and will send Jesus. Paul mentions that in the city of Athens, he saw a monument to the unknown God. Paul mentions that he was "carefully" looking at the city and its people and their beliefs. He does not approach them with an attitude of superiority or condescension.

This is an example for us of how we ought to deal with the people in our lives who are not believers in God as we describe him in church— in the Nicene Creed, for example. Paul did not use proof texts from the Bible. He identified the texts from their poets and philosophers that could offer a bridge between his faith as he understood it and their beliefs.

I really encourage you to read this story for yourself in context. The assigned text is chapter 17, verses 22 through 31. But I encourage you to read the before and after. I encourage you to read verses 16 through 34. Which about doubles the length of the reading. The six verses before the assigned text will tell you more about the context in which Paul made this speech, about the skeptics and the novelty-seekers. And the concluding three verses after the end of the assigned text will tell you that there were three reactions: (1) those who scoffed; (2) those who wanted to learn more; and (3) a few who became believers. The last group includes a certain Dionysius, whose name would come to have a long, important tradition for medieval Christians.

But Paul left. Some scoffed. Some wanted time. And some believed. Paul took the believers with him. But Paul also let go. He didn't try to win a debate. He didn't fret or get neurotic about those who didn't believe or agree. He left room for the Holy Spirit. He let go.

The Apostle Paul as we meet him in his own writings could be pretty tenacious. He certainly knew how to argue, and how to provide counter-arguments. The letters called Galatians and First Corinthians are passionate, argumentative, and tenacious. But that's not all there is to Paul. What we see in this story is that when he wanted to present the good news of Christianity to outsiders, he learned about them first. He looked, listened, and learned before he preached. And when he did share, he did so with reverence and attention to the background of his listeners. And he didn't hit people with the Bible. He surfaced some common beliefs from their own framework, not from his Bible. And he let go. He didn't take personal responsibility for the heart and mind of another. He left it up to them. Up to the Holy Spirit. And to them.

So for those of us who have friends and family who don't believe in the God of the Nicene Creed, Paul shows us a constructive way to engage. But it doesn't involve bullying or badgering or "bible-ing." It requires respectfully learning about where the other is coming from. And then, if possible, finding a shared perspective. And if you can connect the shared perspective back to Jesus, then good.' You may not be able to. And in any event, whether it goes well or it goes badly, to let go and let God. To let the mystery of another human soul continue to be a mystery. Something you cannot control. And to leave space and time for the Holy Spirit. Don't try to do the Spirit's job. Just be respectful and modest and honest. And follow Paul's example from the Areopagus in Athens. Amen.