

Easter 6A

May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

You know, sometimes your best sermon, or your best argument falls upon deaf ears. This is true for Paul, here, in Athens, when he is brought to the Areopagus, in our reading from Acts 17. Perhaps it was his opening line that almost doomed him: he says, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Perhaps there is sarcasm in his voice — or perhaps he is just stating the facts that everyone could see in Athens. You see, there may have been as many as 30,000 shrines to gods in the city of Athens. And yet, even within this city that was replete with gods, there was one that stood out for Paul. He found a shrine to “An Unknown god”. Paul says, in essence, “I see how religious you are — that you hedge your bets by erecting a shrine to an unknown god among you.” Tell me my friends, how do you worship something that has no name, no identity, and no image?

Now I need to emphasize something important to this story of Paul: he is on trial. This was a dangerous moment for Paul. He was alone, his buddies Timothy and Silas had yet to join him. But what I am amazed about Paul and his sermon, here, is that he is not just merely defending himself against this court. He is taking the time to use his rhetorical skills to challenge the Greek worldview. So, is he insulting his audience? That would seem too dangerous. But he doesn’t pause often to allow the court to make any comment — he continues on “So let me tell you about this god you do not know, but who I know so well.”

In the art of persuasive speech, Paul is using an image many of the Athenians could relate to — they lived in the presence of so many gods. So Paul launches his defense from a place they can relate — even if they do note a hint of sarcasm.

The G-d that Paul knows is perhaps, unbeknownst to them, the “unknown god” among them. This G-d is not unknown — it is the G-d who made the world and everything in it. It is the Lord of heaven and earth — and this G-d does not need a shrine, a statue, or even a temple. The G-d who created everything needs nothing that man has to offer — nothing man could build — nothing.

Imagine being in the tribunal listening to Paul — here in the Areopagus. These Greeks have surrounded themselves with shrines, statues, temples built to appease gods of all kinds. In fact, the shrine to an “unknown god”

is the result of an unusual ritual — setting loose hungry sheep to see where they might lie down in the presence of an invisible god. There those sheep were sacrificed to a god that may not have been known to these people — but sacrificed none-the-less — hoping to appease that god so that an outbreak of the plague might be abated. And apparently it worked — so this shrine continues to stand in the presence of the Athenians. And now this Israelite, Paul, although a Roman citizen, this outsider is telling them that there is only “One G-d” — and that G-d that Paul knows is the one THEY call unknown. Now, would they listen to Paul?

Who were the gods of the Greeks? Well, among the 30,000 gods were those many of us know:

Aphrodite — the goddess of beauty

Apollo — the god of music and the arts

Ares — the god of war

Artemis — the goddess of wilderness

Athena — the goddess of wisdom

Dionysius — the god of wine

Eros — the god of love

They had sky gods, agriculture gods, health gods, sleep gods — the list is quite long. Nothing was left to chance. They had determined not to cast their fates to the winds.

Why was Paul even in this situation? Well, as we know, Paul was called by G-d to be the Apostle to the Gentiles and the Jews — and Paul accepted this calling from G-d. At this point in his journeys, he is on his second missionary trip. He had been in Thessalonica preaching in the synagogues, and some Jews and Gentiles accepted his message. But some other Jews were offended and tried to arrest Paul. So he and Silas steal away to Berea. Berea or Beroea was a city of the Roman era in Macedonia, northern Greece. And Paul enters a synagogue to preach Jesus — and again some Jews accept his preaching, and also some Gentiles. But those Jews from Thessalonica come to Berea to make more problems for Paul — and so he is spirited away to Athens. So Paul has the chance to discuss and debate with some stoic philosophers — because many of the people of Athens, as Luke tells us, were interested in listening to and debating only the new. And Paul certainly had something new to tell them.

And since Paul is now on trial, at the Areopagus, he is using his best rhetorical abilities — including quoting Greek poets and philosophers. Paul says: “In this G-d I am preaching to you about, in this G-d who created all things, heaven and earth, the seasons — in this G-d we live, move and have our being.” And then to make his point, he quotes one of the best known and beloved poems of the Athenians: “we live, move, and have our being, or as even some of your poets claim “For we too are his offspring”.

“For we too are his offspring”. It is a quote from the poet Aratus from his beloved Poem “Phoenomena” (Pho.eno.mena). It is a poem about Zeus. Zeus is the sky and thunder god in ancient Greek religion, who rules as “king of the gods” of Mount Olympus. The poem states:

*“Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken
Everywhere, everyone is indebted to Zeus
For we are indeed his offspring”*

According to the Greeks, Zeus is omnipotent. All are the offspring of Zeus. Paul turns this poem around to state:

“We are G-d’s offspring, for which followers have and owe their life, their actions, their everything. We do not think of G-d as being captured in images of gold, silver, or even stone — in any statue or shrine. All of these statues around you mean nothing to G-d — what matters is repentance. The righteousness of man will be judged through Jesus Christ, whom G-d raised from the dead. This G-d, the creator of all things, has been made known to us through Jesus, whom G-d raised from the dead.”

Paul has reached his dramatic conclusion — Jesus is the resurrection, the incarnation of G-d — the one who will judge all people. This is a new idea — it is foreign to the Athenians. And yet, Paul is implying that this is not foreign at all — rather it is what points them to the light — rather than their pagan gods and the pagan culture which points them only to darkness.

Paul has given his best sermon, mixing together Athenian philosophy and poetry — using his context and content to craft a remarkable sermon. And we may only have a part of that sermon — for can we believe that Paul would have been able to preach this sermon “off the cuff”? Perhaps — but Paul has achieved his intent. No, he does not have thousands

who accept his message immediately. But he has a few who agree to give him a second hearing.

What we can say about Paul is this: his sermon certainly is filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul has preached the Spirit of Truth as he has come to know Jesus Christ. And just as John says in our text from John 14, many will not and many cannot receive this spirit of truth. But it is this very truth that strengthens Paul — the spirit of truth and the words and teachings of Jesus are what allows Paul to continue — even in the face of such trials and tribulations.

Imagine how Christ's words, and the Holy Spirit can strengthen us in these troubling and difficult days. I know many want this whole situation to just be done — many just want to go back to normal. I just do not know how to define that word “normal” any more. This coming week, many of the surrounding counties will move from “red” to “yellow” within the phases of returning to “normal”. This will now present some challenges for our council and our members — all church councils and all members of congregations throughout our area. If this initial pandemic made our hearts troubled, I am here to tell you returning to some sense of “normal within the church”, well that also troubles my heart.

But, we all have the good news of the Gospel spoken directly to us from Jesus Christ: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in G-d, Believe also in me”. Just as Jesus was trying to comfort and give hope to his disciples, Jesus is doing the same for you and for me. Today Jesus continues his teaching from our lessons appointed for last week:

“If you love me, you will attend to my commandments, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate — the Spirit of Truth.”

Look, over the next few weeks, and months, we are going to have to listen to many voices — doctors, infectious disease experts, scientists. It will be a troubling but also informative time — a time where we will all perhaps become “experts” in areas such as “infection mitigation” — and learning “the ways in which all viruses spread” — if we have not already become well informed in such matters.

Are we going to be able to agree on these issues? Probably not, initially, for we will all have our opinions about this virus — and also have our own opinion on how we should or should not let it continue to affect our lives.

So, now is the time for us to become hungry for the word of G-d — to immerse ourselves in scripture, trusting that Jesus will not leave us orphaned. That word orphaned is an interesting word — it can mean to be alone, or it can mean isolated, feeling abandoned. Jesus promises that those who continue to hold dear the teachings of Jesus and to continue in his love, then through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will continue to walk with us, to be with us, and to comfort us.

How do we hold dear the teachings of Jesus? We continue to love — love G-d and love our neighbors. These times are going to call for all of us to do what the court of Areopagus did for Paul — they listened, intently. They were open to the new. They allowed the Spirit to move among and within them.

Life will leave us feeling desolate, alone, many times — people may even abandon us — but G-d does not abandon us. G-d's promises remain steadfast and true. And when we dwell in his teachings and make them a daily part of our relationship with Jesus, well then we will know that the Father is in us — and the love of Jesus will abide with us — and the Holy Spirit will be our guide — and we will not feel alone, or abandoned.