

ACTS 17:22-31
PSALM 66:8-20
I PETER 3:13-22
JOHN 14:15-21
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Overlooking Ignorance!

If I had a dollar for every time I have said to myself or to someone else how amazed I am as to the way the lectionary speaks to current events and relevant concerns, always timely, addressing topics or themes that relate to our contemporary circumstances and situations, I would be a very rich man and probably would have long retired to a life of leisure. Will preach for food! Without giving it any attention aforethought, today's lection from the book of Acts follows perfectly, seamlessly transitioning from my sermon from last week. This morning we read of Paul's exciting adventure as he visited Athens, Greece, perhaps the most interesting and intriguing evangelistic missionary journey he made as a passionate apostle for the gospel. This metropolitan enclave was the hub of multicultural religious pluralism, diversity seen throughout the city depicted on numerous obelisks and statues, each one dedicated to a myriad of deities named in honor of various symbols of earth and sky, many aspects of creation gloriously lauded to the highest power. **From Aphrodite to Zeus!** It truly had to be a scene that obviously fascinated, impressed, and perhaps to a degree disturbed Paul, a former Pharisee who had long been a defender of the monotheistic faith of his birth as he touted the virtues of traditional Judaism, the spinoff of its famous offspring, an unfortunate stepchild, nonetheless. Despite a propensity to raise

anxiety and to fuel anger and frustration, especially among the original eleven disciples, evidently Paul was intuitive enough to realize, to know deep in his psyche, that he needed a different tact, some diplomacy, a sensitivity, a softer, kinder and gentler side, that would not offend or insult those he sought to convert. **The Athenians were not bumpkins! These were the philosophically inclined debaters of the ancient world who enjoyed the rapport with the likes of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. Yes, you might say these were the equivalent of first century postmoderns, a variation thereof. We could perhaps even label them as progressives. These Grecian Hellenists were the critically thinking, intellectually curious, intuitively intelligent, people of their day. Paul had to be on his game. And on this day, just like many other days, he was!**

Mikeal C. Parsons, commenting on today's lection, says that to better "understand the rhetorical and cultural strategies of Paul's Areopagus speech, we must consider the passing note made by Luke in Acts 17:21: 'Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners living among them spent their time in nothing other than (trying) either to say or to hear something novel.'"¹ Kind of like what I attempt to do in my preaching every week! Yes, the Athenians loved something new, new things, yes something innovative, different! As Parsons goes on to say, "the Areopagus sermon is the fullest and most dramatic speech of Paul's career."² This is one of two times that Paul preached to a predominantly gentile audience! As Paul strolled about town, taking in the sights and sounds of what surely in his estimation was a very foreign, if not bizarre, place, imagine his utter fascination with all there was to behold in what surely must have been a rather eclectic town. Imagine being on a getaway "vaca" as a Jew from Israel touring Athens, Greece for the first time. From our biblical readings, Hebrew

¹Material adapted from The Acts of the Apostles. Paideia Commentary Series. Eds. Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group), 2008, 1.

²Ibid., 1.

Bible and Christian scriptures alike, we can surmise that Israel and the holy city of Zion, Jerusalem, was rather conservative, probably a bit uptight, religion and society cross pollinated and hardwired in every way imaginable, the letter of the law, all 613 of them, always front and center, out to spoil your fun. And then there was this Greek epicenter, ground zero of cultural laxity, if there really was such a thing in the ancient world. Paul must have surely been blown away by what no doubt was sensory overload, differences so pronounced, so radically divergent from his customs. And yet, here he was, like the Blues Brothers, on a mission from God! He had a job to do and wanted to do it well. How could he even begin to reach his new audience, finding a way to touch a nerve, to make an impact with a message that probably would come across as pedestrian, the apostle appearing to be a religious simpleton, a novice at this sport, oh so boring to this sophisticated crowd. But if anyone were equipped for such a conversation and such an audacious task it would have been this relatively new apostle who had steeled himself for such moments in time as this. Here goes nothing! Here goes everything!

In so many ways Paul somehow managed to match the intellectual acumen of the Athenians step for step, stride for stride. Paul, the master of the be all things to all people (I Corinthians 9:22) accommodationist, you know, when in Rome, intuitively sensed, knowing that the only way to converse with, and to potentially convert, this people was to meet them on their terms, was to match them at their own game, all the while gaining their respect as a people who all had more than half a brain. As we like to say in the south, you win more flies with honey! This is the place in our introspection about the narrative that we dare suggest that the Holy Spirit was working overtime, surely leading, giving the apostle a whole lot of direction because Paul's invocation and engagement of the citizens of Athens was flawless, impeccable in every way. As we like to say, nailed it! Just like in the 1996 movie Jerry McGuire, Paul

had them at hello! Standing in the middle of the council at the Areopagus, a prominent rock outcropping located northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, Paul faced the Athenian governing authorities and any and everyone else who had gathered to hear this strange message from this strangest stranger. In this local context Paul was the outsider, the other, an alien on a pilgrimage in a foreign land. Yes, he was on their turf! What feelings that reality must have created in the former Pharisee, a once revered man who once had an impeccable reputation, well respected for preserving and protecting the faith tradition of his birth, as he wielded great authority, all the power and prestige that came with Pharisaical status, that is, until he soiled his image as a faithful Jew, throwing it all away to follow Christ. Here, in this locale, he was a nobody, just another would be philosopher getting his big chance at the big time on the big stage. Like any standup comic or would be actor, this was Paul's moment in the sun on one of the biggest stages in his brief evangelistic missionary career. Yes, "Athens Idol!" Pun intended! Wow, what a venue! After all, in Athens, philosophical debate was a major form of entertainment, more than the mere passing of time.

And so, as with many a great musical composition, the evidently well-rehearsed Paul begins soft, slow, and steady, already knowing where the crescendos would be, where the climactic moment of his dramatic presentation would occur. His first move was to offer a positive acknowledgment, right out of the playbook of a Dale Carnegie seminar on how to win friends and influence people, complementing them on their brand of religiosity, taking note of their priority in the way they were meticulously religious in every way. Flattery will get you everywhere! An excellent question was raised earlier by (Deb Stolze) and I forgot the answer: Did Paul have a translator? Did he need one? Thanks to Dale Bishop, we got the answer, Dale reminding me that Paul was from Tarsus and so, yes, he spoke fluent Greek). **As one singer, song writer opined about another human interaction, a very**

different context, Paul needed a “slow hand with an easy touch!” As Enuma Okoro notes, writing about this text, “I’ve always found it strangely refreshing that Paul chooses not to ram the gospel down the Athenians’ throats. He speaks about essential aspects of belief in Christ without naming names, without embellishing life through rose-tinted glasses, and without using scare tactics.”³ Paul built at least a modicum of trust, a level of comfort, removing what had to be a wave of anxiety that surely wafted among the gathered populous of wary and suspicious studious listeners. The apostle described all that he had observed as he took what surely was his first tour of this anything but one-horse town, noticing all the objects of worship that had been carefully built, dedicated, and strategically placed throughout the city. And then, this apostolic giant in the making, politely comments on the intricacy of each carefully and purposefully constructed idol, Paul most complementary. Obviously, their goal was to cover all their deistic bases. They even built one altar with this inscription, “To an unknown God!” Paul had found his entry point. The rest was gravy! He boldly and forthrightly declares to them, ‘What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you’ and from there he briefly tells the story of One in whom all human beings live, and move, and exist, or in other translations, have their very being! Paul never condemns, dismisses, or denounces their many religious expressions, their personal and corporate deities, never bashing their spiritual pathways. We do not have to be in competition because we are not in competition! No, Paul simply adds one more to the mix. I guess you could say the apostle was not a first century version of cancel culture, whatever that means! We tend to assume some piously righteous indignation, Paul’s disgust and rejection of these images graphically on display, taking no prisoners. Surely, he would verbally, demonstrably, condemn these many gods to the various elements. After all, Paul seems to come across as an inflexible hardliner in his

³Enuma Okoro, fr. Sunday’s Coming; “A Storyteller Who Respects His Audience (Acts 17:22-31),” *The Christian Century*, May 19, 2017.

epistolary letters. That assumption is not in the text! Yes, there would be scoffers, there always are, but there were also those who chose to listen to him again. And yes, a few repented and converted. Job well done!

Of course, Paul concludes with the Jesus story, articulating the Christ event as he had come to understand it. No doubt his words sounded alien and yet vaguely familiar, and all at the same time! Piggybacking his borrowing of his unexpectant hosts' understanding of God as "unknown," Paul's testimony is a reminder that indeed, despite our knowing, that God is transcendent mystery, yes, Holy Other, Great Spirit of the Universe, Ground of All Being, numinous, i.e., Spirit. And yet, Paul reminds those whose inquiries, those whose quest for knowledge, like the Athenians, has no boundaries, that with some hard work, some heavy theological lifting, some due theological diligence, there continues to be much to learn and much to know. There is always more that we have yet to discover! It is a reminder that religion in all its manifestations, that spirituality in all its many forms, is as much about knowledge, about learning, as it is about belief, as much about learning as it is about faith. Doubt is not our enemy! Doubt is a gift! A blind faith is an ill-informed and naïve faith, a faith built on sand! Paul knew it then and we are blessed to know it now!

There is one short phrase that grabbed my attention as I considered and prepared this sermon. It is two words from verse thirty in which Paul declares that God "overlooks ignorance!" And in today's anti-intellectual Christian climate, my first thought was God must have to overlook a lot of ignorance to even begin to tolerate what is sadly and egregiously passing for Christianity today. Now, I am preaching! We are being constantly bombarded with the threats of white Christian nationalism, its seed born in nineteenth century revivalism, fueled by the Moral Majority and the Religious Roundtable, and now is being fed by those whose understanding of the faith of our forebears does

not in any way even remotely resemble the humble, merciful and peaceful, graciously loving, way of Jesus. You know it when you see it and you see it often. Keith Self, the state representative from Texas, responded to the latest gun violence in the mass shooting in Allen, Texas by choosing to dismiss, avoid and ignore, the crisis. Criticizing those who criticize “thoughts and prayers” as the only alternative solution to a complex problem, he piously, self-righteously, responded, “Those are people that don’t believe in an almighty God who is absolutely in control of our lives . . . I’m a Christian. I believe that he is. Today we should be focused on the families. Prayers are important . . . Prayer is powerful in the lives of those people who are devastated right now.”⁴ First of all, those people are a “who” and not a “that!” Second, God is not a male! Third, if God is in control of this mess, that does not say much about God! When asked about the government attempting to week out white nationalists, i.e., racists, white supremacists, U.S. senator from Alabama, Tommy Tuberville, said, “I call the Americans!” Dear God!

As Okoro adds, “I am an avid reader of fiction because of the power of narrative to convey truth. But I have never enjoyed fiction marketed as Christian—it always comes off as too preachy, too contrived, too judgmental . . . Paul may not be telling any fictions, but he is using some of the skills of a good storyteller who knows how to capture his audience’s attention.” But this is not really intended in any way to be a sermon about this plague pervading the consciousness of our nation, an attempt to force an angry, judgmental, viewpoint down our throats, a threat to our country’s civility and freedom, though sermons about this pariah are needed in open minded churches like ours that are the antithesis to this narrow, sectarian, cultlike, movement. This is a sermon designed to remind us of our need to seize our Pauline moment, to have our say, to preach what we practice, to practice what

⁴Nypost.com/2023/05/07.

we preach, in ways that define who we are and what we long to accomplish in our community and in the world. Jesus once condemned those who hide their light under a bushel (Matthew 5:15), a warning that we are called to be light to the world, proclaiming boldly a prophetic witness, a Christlike testimony, that yes, shakes the very foundations of all the humanity that lives and moves and has being in this global village, yes, with every ounce of breath we take.

While much of Christendom, especially in this country, but also in many other places around the world, seems to be willfully taking steps backward in their insular wagon circling, creating myriad protective bubbles, public isolationists, there are still Christian outposts like ours who are intentionally bucking the trend, believing that the best way into a better and brighter future is to recover the essence of Jesus' mission and ministry, proudly proclaiming the content of his preaching and teaching. Paul showed us more than two thousand years ago that we do not have to check our brains at the door to be faithful stewards of the way of Christ, people of the steeple whose beliefs are steeled by intellectual stimulation and varied explorations of all things religious, everything spiritual. Against the backdrop of anti-intellectual Christianity, now perhaps more than ever, a new but very old, a different but very familiar, word needs to ring in the public square just like it did on a fateful day way back when, when Paul and his entourage found themselves in Athens, Greece of all places.

The faith of our forebears, our forefathers and foremothers, has withstood the test of time and can withstand any test of our most brutally honest inquiries, any critical commentary, the best analytics we can dish out in our personal and collective journey. This faith can handle our doubts, our skepticism, and our cynicism. It has done so from the beginning! The challenge before us individually and corporately, as a church committed to addressing the questions raised

by the voices influenced by the context and culture of global postmodernism while embracing a progressive agenda, is to not shrink like violets, but to stand tall and firm in the proverbial saddle, to resist the temptations of the paths of least resistance, the kinds of anxiety, the levels of fear, that produce the pungently bad porridge of the least common denominators of Simple Simon Says parroted theological triviality. As the brighter bulbs on the tree, the sharper knives in the drawer, it is our job to own our narrow, to claim our space as proclaimers, giving witness, demanding the graciously loving way of Jesus in the world, conversion not our priority. It is not about being cocky or conceited, arrogant or smug, but of being faithful to our calling and our pathway as we follow the still speaking Christly Spirit of God. As the saying goes, “you can’t fix stupid!” Stupid is as stupid does! Folks, our job is not to fix the unfixable! It is impossible anyway! Our job is to mentor and model in the world! Sometimes we have no choice, no alternative but to overlook ignorance, but, however, when possible, do our best to overcome it. Good luck with that, God bless and Godspeed! **Ours is a faith of great substance, deepest insight, and always has been. This profound aspect of the faith of our faithful, spiritual, fathers and mothers, joyfully and painfully handed down through the ages must never be minimized, avoided, or ignored, but must always be explored, engaged, and emphasized. It is exactly what Paul did in Athens, Greece on a certain day once upon a time at Mars Hill. It is a formula now needed more than ever as we seek to engage the most cynical and understandably unbelieving among us. Wow, the apostle Paul for one night only at the Areopagus of the Acropolis. Wow, what a gig it turned out to be!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and overlooks our ignorance, desiring that we overcome it too! Makes perfect sense! Amen and amen.

