

Easter Worship Series: Acts of the ‘Sent Ones’
“Preaching In Athens”

6th of Easter: 25 May 2014: Sermon Text: Acts 17:22-34
FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

“Men of ill judgment oft ignore the good that lies within their hands, till they have lost it”
(Sophocles [496 BC—406 BC], Ajax).

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Summer begins with a tribute to fallen soldiers. Have you ever wondered why we memorialize fallen soldiers as summer begins? The answer is because of spring flowers. The first memorial days occurred in 1865 in both South and North, only a month after the War Between the States ended. These solemn practices fast became annual traditions; these “decoration days” were typically set for early summer, when people could easily access flowers to lay on headstones.

Decoration days helped a torn nation heal. People told—and retold—war stories, honored the feats of local heroes, reconciled with foes. After World War I, communities extended the holiday to honor all who died in military service, although the official national observance didn’t begin until 1971. Tomorrow, no matter where you are, Memorial Day’s national moment of remembrance takes place at 3 p.m. local time.

Now hear our lesson from Acts 17:22-34:

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For 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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

28 For ‘In him we live and move and have our being,’ as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ 29 Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has

overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 At that point Paul left them. 34 But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them (Acts 17:22-34).

Luke’s story of Paul in Athens offers insight into Luke’s purpose in making the Athenian events prominent. The New Testament mentions Athens only once outside Acts (1 Thess. 3:1). Thus, we conclude that Luke’s decision to devote a whole chapter to the city had a weighty purpose. Bishop Willimon suggests: We have seen the power of the gospel to reach rich and poor, Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female. But can the gospel hold its own in the sophisticated intellectual environment of a university town? Luke takes Paul to Athens, to the heart of the very best of pagan culture, the town of Pericles and of Plato (1988, p. 142).

Placing Paul in Athens, Luke sets Paul at the center of learning. Can the gospel debate/argue persuasively with the ancient world’s elite thinkers and speakers? In other words, can God make the gospel incarnate in any culture, at any time, and in any place? Luke answers “yes” and demonstrates this affirmation through his account of Paul’s speech. Paul’s speech incarnates the gospel in a fresh culture.

For example, Charles Mann notes: Major power and telephone grids have long been controlled by computer networks, but now similar systems are embedded in such mundane objects as electric meters, alarm clocks, home refrigerators and thermostats, video cameras, bathroom scales, and Christmas-tree lights—all of which are, or soon will be, accessible remotely.

Or as Christina Aguilera declared: “Growing up with the childhood that I had, I learned to never let a man make me feel helpless, and it also embedded a deep need in me to always stick up for women.” All of which means that if

human science or Christina Aguilera can be incarnate in their causes, then assuredly God can become incarnate in the intellectual nucleus of human thought—Athens.

Of course, we are two weeks past “Mother’s Day,” but mothers apply innately, what all Christians can learn to do. That is, mothers identify fully with their children. Mothers—and this isn’t surprising—are also often the driving forces behind good churches. Why? Perhaps because they know the value of giving the gift of meaning and purpose to children and indeed all people. But in order to impart wisdom to others, it is first necessary to know and identify with others.

This, no doubt, is the church’s task: to be like a mother in bringing faith to its children. As Augustine said, “He cannot have God for his father who refuses to have the church for his mother.” The best churches identify with the dreams and hurts of people. Paul achieves this when he preaches to pagans at the Areopagus. Paul seeks common ground with the ancient world’s most sophisticated and well-educated people—Athens the cradle of Western Civilization. It is the turf of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Folks in Athens are not easily impressed, but they like good speeches. Paul never preached to an audience like this. A fact: Here is the only speech in Acts by Paul, the Gentiles’ missionary, preached entirely to Gentiles.

Notice Paul’s strategy; he begins by flattering his audience and then moves to where they are, as seekers of the truth. Paul twice quotes their philosophers, saying: something about their “unknown god” and then, “In him we live and move and have our being;” as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’” Using familiar ideas, Paul identifies with his audience

before he tries to persuade and then convert them—in other words, bring them to faith.

We could say that this is the church's first task before anything else. We, as those formed by the gospel, may listen deeply to the world's anguish. Only by recognizing what the world believes do we then get a hearing for the sharing the life-changing story of Jesus' gospel. Jesus listened before speaking. When exiles by the waters of Babylon asked, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" they sought an answer. Their answer for these singers is to sing it in ways that can be understood by those to whom we sing.

The response to the gospel and to Paul's preaching differs. There are three basic reactions. The **first** group included those who mocked Paul. Paul puts the good news within the grasp of these people and all they can do is sneer. Sadly, we all know people like this. The **second** group represents those, polite enough, but say in a thousand ways, "We will hear you again about this." In other words, they fail to entertain the possibility of a decision and put Paul off.

The **third** group, Luke symbolizes by way of a man and a woman, Dionysius and Damaris. These two converts make a key decision. Dionysius and Damaris became part of the great cloud of witness that we claim as our spiritual ancestors. They joined Paul and became disciples.

Today each of us has a decision before us—like those in Luke's story from Acts 17. "No trumpets sound when the important decisions of our life are made. Destiny is made known silently" (Agnes DeMille). But whatever your silent decision is, know that sometimes it is a decision that is not only in our world's best interest—but also in our own best interest as well. Amen.