**Confidently Sharing Jesus with Others – June 9, 2013 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Acts 17:16-31 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“Let Those Who Know Tell Those Who Don’t”**

*16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue* *with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news* *about Jesus and the resurrection.* *19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus,* *where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching* *is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21 (All the Athenians* *and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) 22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus* *and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.* *23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown* *I am going to proclaim to you. 24 "The God who made the world and everything in it* *is the Lord of heaven and earth* *and does not live in temples built by hands.* *25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.* *26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.* *27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.* *28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'* *As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill.* *30 In the past God overlooked* *such ignorance,* *but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.* *31 For he has set a day when he will judge* *the world with justice* *by the man he has appointed.* *He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*

It was about 50AD - 20 years after Jesus died, rose and ascended into heaven - Paul was on his second missionary journey. His travels took him around the coastlines of Turkey and Greece along the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. He had just traveled through the towns of Thessalonica and Berea, leaving behind his travel companions Silas and Pastor Timothy in Berea. They would join him soon in Athens.

Athens, Greece… at its peak had been the center for philosophy, a great contributor in art and literature. Athens taught the world democracy, the rule of the people. But now its glory had dimmed and was no longer the chief city of Greece. But the citizens of Athens still held on to their love of wisdom and knowledge.

This was the city Paul walked into. He followed his usual practice when he strolled into a new city: he hit the local synagogue on the Sabbath to talk to the Jews about Jesus. But as he walked through the city he was very disturbed to see so many idols, shrines, and temples for the idols. It was excessive. It has been said that Athens had more gods than men. Paul felt the need to spend his time in the marketplace as well, where he would have contact with non-Jewish folks, Gentiles. The ancient marketplace was more than just the outdoor farmers’ market. In Athens, philosophers met for conversation and exchanged ideas, kind of like the Waffle House today.

Among the philosophers there were two main camps of thought: Epicurean philosophers – they believed that the gods were not interested in the affairs of humankind, there was no afterlife, so “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!” Stoic philosophers believed that humans must live in harmony with nature, that the gods are nature and in nature. These wise and learned men heard Paul talk about Jesus and a resurrection of the dead. This was something new to them, gods they had not heard of before. And so they described Paul as a babbler, literally, a bird who picked up little crumbs of knowledge on his travels, but really didn’t know much, so they dismissed him. But others were intrigued, so…

…they brought him to the Areopagus, on Mars Hill in Athens, the council of Athens who met to pass judgment, as it were, on new philosophies and religions, and discuss new gods. They were always ready to hear the latest trends in spirituality. The babbler was given an audience.

Paul began his sermon, “**Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious**!” He then described everything he had observed as he walked through the city: their uncommon devotion to the gods; the temples built to honor and house all of the gods; the number of gods themselves, made out of stone, overlayed with gold, silver; how zealous they were in their worship - people were found daily at the temples and shrines, praying, offering gifts of clothing and food. Paul even discovered an altar to an unknown god. The Greek word *unknown* is where our English word *agnostic* is derived. The men of Athens did not want to omit a god and offend him accidentally.

Paul then said, **“Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you**.” Notice that he said, “what you worship,” rather than “whom you worship.” Paul was about to reveal to them a very living, personal God. Paul begins to methodically poke holes in their paper cup filled with “knowledge”.

The True God, whom they called “Unknown” is the God who made the universe and all that is in it. You can almost watch Paul as he points to the Parthenon, the temple dedicated to the goddess Athene, and ask them, “Does it make sense that God, who made the world, would need to live in a temple made by human hands?” And this True God who sustained them with food and clothing, did he need their gifts of clothing and food? He is the God who gives life and breath to all. Does he need anything?

This is the God who made man, and from that one man, Adam, he produced the nations of the world. He set the times and places where human beings would live. He controlled the history of the world. He dictated the rise and fall of nations. Is this the God who like an image, made from stone and overlayed with gold or silver? No.

Paul quoted some of their own poets who had written, “**We are his offspring**.” Paul argued, “Since we came from God, how can God come from us? How can he be an image made by man’s design, man’s skill and man’s creation? How can man be his creator if God gave life to all?”

Paul was saying, “These gods in Athens are really no gods at all. This “Unknown God” whom I have just described for you is the true God. He is the only One God. God is giving you evidence that he exists. God has given this evidence of his existence so that all people all over the world will realize that a powerful, intelligent, divine being is in charge of the universe. God’s intention is that the people of the world **‘would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.’”** (vs27)

But the problem is this: the people of world cannot know who the true God is just by looking at the stars and the sun, and how awesome the universe is. They still do not have true faith or true belief in the true God just by acknowledging that he exists. Because they still don’t know that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They don’t know Jesus, and Jesus said that no one can come to the Father except through faith in Him. God has to send someone who does know him, who does believe in him, and they must tell those who do not know. Knowledge of the True God can only be gained through His revealed Word in the Bible. Faith in the true God can only come through hearing the message of Christ. (Romans 10.17) And that’s what Paul came to Athens to do: to tell those who did not know the True God. That’s why Paul was so upset as he walked through the city. These people were so close and yet so far away from the truth of who God is, so close to salvation, and yet, they had nothing.

Do you see the great gift that the Lord gave to the Apostle Paul? He had the ability to walk into a city he had never set foot, to listen to the people, ask the locals questions, get to know them, and then met them where they were at. Paul used their mistaken beliefs as the starting point from which he then moved on to preach the good news of the One True God.

This July 18 will be nine years in the public ministry for me, all nine years as pastor at Faith in Radcliff. Early on in those years as I made home visits to guests who had come to church we would sit in their living room and talk, and it always happened in the course of conversation that an individual would say, “I believe this, that and the other thing.” Too many times I made the mistake of trying to “fix” each of their false statements, “Well… this is what the Bible says about that.” I actually felt guilty if I did not address each point of false doctrine. If I did not confront each opinion that contradicted Scripture, I felt that I was somehow not carrying out my duty to preach and teach the Word of God in all of its truth and purity. The other problem I ran into is that I became so busy chasing the rabbits of incorrect Bible teachings all around the living room that I forgot to share the most important truth, the very reason I came to their home in the first place – the problem of our sin, and the solution to that problem found in Jesus.

Have you fallen into that trap? Instead of meeting someone where they were at, you immediately tried to throw the whole Bible at them? Instead of listening to them so that you might understand their point of view, you assumed too much? Instead of sharing the most important message of Scripture, you tried to argue every other point of the Bible? Or maybe you just gave up and decided it wasn’t worth the fight. Or maybe you were too scared to initiate the conversation in the first place!

You’re not alone. Even Jesus’ disciples didn’t get it right every time the opportunity was there to share the good news of their Savior. You remember Jonah from our First Lesson, who ran away when God asked him to share the Word! You remember Peter, who was asked three times, not about some difficult teaching like the vicarious atonement of Christ or infant baptism or close communion or predestination, no, he was asked three times if he just knew Jesus of Nazareth. Three times he denied it.

How did Jesus treat his denying disciple? He went and carried the punishment that denial cost Peter - he suffered God’s wrath for Peter, he suffered hell for Peter, he died for Peter. Then he raised his dead body from the grave so Jesus could stand before Peter and say to him, “You are forgiven. You are still my disciple. Now go and tell the good news to all creation.”

How does Jesus treat us, who have not always focused on sharing the good news, who have shied away from even a simple invitation to an unchurched friend, who have not been so loving in our approach when we explain the good news of Jesus? He treats us the same way he treated his friend Peter.

This God, whom the men of Athens thought was far away and didn’t care at all about his creation, this God says to each and every one of you, “Before creation, I chose you to be one of my children. (Eph 1) And as I arranged the history of nations, I selected the Hebrews to be carriers of the promise, and through the Jews, I sent my Son to be the faithful witness, to be the unwavering preacher of sin and redemption. I sent my Son to carry the punishment that your unfaithfulness, the punishment of suffering and hell and death. And then I raised him from the grave to show you that he did all that was necessary for your forgiveness. And then I called you by name, when you were washed with water and my Word. There I promised you that you are forgiven. There I called you my disciple. And now I am telling you again, you are still my disciple. I am sending you out into the world, a world that does not know me, a world that may acknowledge I exist, but they don’t know me, they don’t know my love, they don’t know my promises, they don’t know my Son Jesus. But you do. And you will tell them.”

It will be good for us to follow the example of the Apostle Paul… that we first meet people where they are at….and that means taking the time to listen to them, to ask them questions, to show we care.

However… that doesn’t mean that when we seemingly slide over a statement that contradicts Scripture that we are compromising the truth of the Bible. Jesus tells us to defend everything he taught, and to speak the truth in love. Eventually, as we develop a relationship with these people, we’ll address those issues. And many times, as the Apostle Paul did, we can use those discussions as starting points to tell the story of the Creator, the story of our sin, and how we are all sinners, and how we all are in desperate need of a Savior, and that Savior from sin and death is Jesus Christ.

Maybe I “cannot speak like angels,” I know I “cannot preach like Paul,” as we just sang in our hymn, but I “can tell the love of Jesus, and say, ‘He died for all.’” (CW 573) You and I know the love of Jesus. Let us tell those who do not know. Amen.