

THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 25, 2014 – Acts 17:22-31

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For 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. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From 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. ²⁷God 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. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For 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.”

If you have lived a few years, like many of us have, you have to be aware of the changing religious climate in America. When I was growing up in the Upper Midwest there were many different Christian denominations represented in our city and also a small Jewish Synagogue, but that was it. There were no Hindu or Buddhist temples or Muslim Mosques. Today, that is all changing. While membership in Christian denominations has plateaued the Eastern and Middle Eastern religions are growing by leaps and bounds.

What does that mean for us? We can come to the conclusion that it doesn’t matter what one believes or if one believes at all, or we better know what we believe and why so we are well grounded in our own faith.

In our text this morning we find that the Apostle Paul has moved south from Thessalonica and Berea and is now in the city of Athens, Greece. Here was a city where almost every religion and god imaginable was represented. As we find ourselves living in a country that is becoming more and more like Athens at Paul’s time, Paul’s message is certainly appropriate for us. Paul will lead us to see that it does matter whom we worship and in whom we believe. For that reason we especially focus on Paul’s words in verse 28:

“IN (GOD) WE LIVE AND MOVE AND HAVE OUR BEING.”

WHO IS THIS GOD WHOM WE WORSHIP?

LOOK AT THE ANSWER OF THE ATHENIAN.

Athens was a center of idolatry and mythology. It was a very literate city steeped in Greek paganism and culture. The philosopher Petronius said: “It is easier to find a god (in Athens) than a man.” The poet Xenophon wrote: “(Athens) is one great altar, one great offering to the gods.”

Athens was also well represented by both the Epicureans and the Stoics. One might say they were the “professional philosophers.” Each of those groups had a different philosophy. Look at what the Epicureans professed: For them the highest aim of life was pleasing oneself. In their theology they were atheistic and they also mocked the popular mythologies of their day. They offered no better substitute for life than “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die.”

And then there were the Stoics. In their theology they were pantheists – believing that matter is inseparable from god. They condemned formal worship of any kind. They believed that one’s

soul was absorbed into “god” at death and taught that reason was the ultimate guide of life. One positive about them was that they followed a very high moral code. But that did not make things any better in the end for both of these philosophies are diametrically opposed to Christianity.

Yes, the Athenians had all kinds of gods, all kinds of worship and all kinds of philosophies. Yet they did not know or believe in the Triune God. In the end they had only superstition and idolatry.

PAUL COMES AND PROCLAIMS THE GOD OF THE BIBLE TO THE ATHENIANS.

Yet Paul doesn't start with the Bible. He knew their culture, he knew they were always looking for something new. Only because they thought Paul might have a new philosophy or insight were they willing to listen to him. If he told them he was proclaiming something 4000 years old they would have turned away immediately.

Paul uses their statue “**to an unknown god**” as his starting point. This was a god whom they knew existed, but they knew nothing about him. With all their “gods” they knew there might be another one, one they missed. Paul says there is a God whom they know nothing about, a god they missed. There is a God whom they were not worshipping or serving. Who is this God? He is the God who created all things (24). He is the God who gives, not takes (25).

Look at the difference. Life and breath have but one source, the true God. Here is a God who gives us everything we need for life here and for eternal life. In the face of what the true God does and gives all those other gods of the Athenians were worth nothing. Paul makes known to them this “unknown” God who can be known! They need not continue in superstition and idolatry. They can through faith be truly religious in a God-pleasing way.

WE PROCLAIM THAT GOD OF THE BIBLE.

There need be no doubt about that among us. This is the very basis of the organization of our church and most other Christian churches. We believe in that one God of the Bible – the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And yet superstition and idolatry even affects Christians. There are those who have known true Christianity and have rejected it. They have been taken in by the false religions that are flourishing today. They have given up “done for you by Christ” and replaced it with “I work my hardest to get right with my god.”

What is that superstition and idolatry that might tempt us today. How about the false religion of the horoscope and “bad luck?” I don't mean just reading one's horoscope for fun, but actually believing what it says. Or “bad luck.” That can be as simple as believing that you will have bad luck if a black cat crosses your path causing you to break a mirror on Friday the 13th.

How would it be if I walked around Towne Mall in Elizabethtown and said, “People of Kentuckiana! I see that in every way you are very religious. As I walked around the mall I saw the objects of your worship.” I saw how you were lined up and performed special rituals before the god of what you have called the ATM. I saw your god of power on your left wrist – a holy band that tells you when to come and when to go, when you can be with the ones you love and when you can't. I heard the sound of your ipads, smartphones, and tablets that control your life. I know how you cast your lots with the Powerball waiting for your world to turn around. I've seen how the last work day of your week is called TGIF in your language, a special holy day, a day you look forward to more than any other. That may sound crazy but isn't there a lot of truth in it?

How blessed we are to be part of a Christian church body that walks together under the cross of Christ. Today we especially are reminded that we are partners with more than 1200 other

congregations around the world. Our Synod is involved in Home Mission work in the United States. This congregation was established and funded for several years by the Board for Home Missions of our Synod. I am sure this congregation would not be here today if it were not for that initial financial support from our brothers and sisters in our Synod. Right now our BHM is involved in supporting over 100 other congregations to help them reach self-support just as we have.

Our BHM is seeking to reach out to the many multi-cultural communities in the United States, not just gathering German immigrants together in a congregation. Not only is work done in Spanish but in other languages as well.

Our world mission work reaches more than twenty countries of the world and publishes materials in more than forty different languages. We have an educational system second to none to train future church workers. Last week twenty new pastors were assigned to their first parish and many teachers to their first schools. We also have a parish services division to help congregations carry out their work of proclaiming the message of the gospel with those in the military, with those incarcerated and those with special physical and emotional needs. We walk together with 350,000 other people and declare, "In God we live, move, and have our being."

WHOM DO WE WORSHIP?

FOR PAUL IT WAS A LIFE AND DEATH MATTER.

The art around Athens did not appeal to him. It was beautiful to see the carving, statues, and religious items. But as he saw the idolatry of it all the more incensed he became. He just had to speak out with the truth, but he had to do it in a tactful way.

He saw how those false ideas about God had destroyed true worship. They could not know and worship the true God unless they knew the Bible. They could not receive the blessings of forgiveness and salvation unless they knew the true God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit -revealed in the Bible. The natural ideas of God from their reasons or their consciences could not save them or lead them to true worship. Yes, the Bible says, "**The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork.**" But the Bible also says, "**You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.**" Jesus says, "**I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**" Without faith there is no true worship and no salvation. Paul's work in Athens was eternally important.

THAT WORK IS STILL IMPORTANT TODAY.

Can true and false religion exist side by side? Many people think so – for different reasons. Some think they can co-exist because one is as valid as the next. Some think that it does not matter what one believes because somehow in the end God will save everyone. That might sound good, but there is no justification for it in the scriptures.

Others think that superstition and idolatry are only fun and games. The sad thing is that fun and games can push true religion and the true God out the window. We cannot just follow others. Like the Athenians people today say they are looking for something new. We have something as fresh and new as if it had just been revealed yesterday even though it has been around for more than 6000 years. Ours is a living God, a living faith, and a living religion. Our religion, faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, is the only saving religion. Our religion is the only religion that can overcome idols, sin, death, and hell itself. True Christianity cannot exist on an equal plain with any other religion.

Let us worship him who revealed himself to us and by grace through faith has saved us. It needs to be a matter of life and death for us and for the people we come in contact with. Let us find joy in that living faith we have. Let us thank God that we are part of a church body that still takes these truths seriously and is not willing to compromise them! Let us take them seriously for in Him “we live and move and have our being.” Amen.

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