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Acts 17:22–29, ESV.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually 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 are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

To the unknown god.

One of the most insightful and downright entertaining narratives in the New Testament can be found in Chapter 17 of Acts. Luke, who is also the author of a Gospel, tells us about the martyrs who spread the faith in the wake of Jesus’ ascension into Heaven. In Chapter 17 of Acts, verses 16 to 34, we hear about Paul’s stay in Athens. We are given a vivid description of Athens and we see Paul deliver the gospel to the people whom he finds there. Paul first characterizes the people

of Athens as being very religious, albeit pagans. He then describes the problems with worshipping idols. He then calls for the people there to repent. We are concerned mostly with the second section of this story: his condemnation of the pagan practices of the people of Athens. But first, here is some context.

Much of the architecture and art of the people of Athens at this time centered around their religion. So, Paul would have been surrounded by religious statues, altars, and temples. He would have met people who were members of the two primary philosophical schools: the Epicureans and the Stoics. We are told that Paul debated these people. Epicurus taught his followers that there is no possibility that the soul survives after death and that there is no afterlife. He believed that people should, in life, seek sustainable pleasure and the absence of any sort of pain. On the contrary, stoicism tells us that people should endure pain, fear, hardship, hunger, any sort of suffering without any complaint or emotion. Paul is mocked he is called a “babbling”. They say that Paul is talking about “foreign divinities” when he talks about Jesus and the resurrection of Christ. Apparently, some of them think that Paul is talking about two different gods, one is Jesus and the other is a resurrected being, and this second one might be female. Paul is then taken, perhaps against his will, we’re not sure, to the Areopagus. This refers to both a geographic area, as well as the ruling council, and apparently, it is to the council

that Paul is taken. These people, the council members, would have been in charge of deciding if Paul is to be allowed to speak in Athens' various public forums. Here is the beginning of our passage:

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'

In the tradition of orators of the time and place, Paul is standing. He begins, wisely, on a positive note, pointing out that the people of Athens are clearly very religious. But the word that he uses to say that they are religious can also mean that they are "superstitious". Although Paul is in truth incensed by the array of idols and pagan statues that he sees, he is being diplomatic. He is trying to win followers to Christ, not start a religious war. He then says that he happens to have noticed an altar that had on it an inscription saying: "To the unknown god". There is, by the way, no known artifact that would match this description. What we know of the ancient Greek culture and religious practices, however, would make it quite possible that such an altar existed. Paul then says:

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,

27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually 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 are indeed his offspring.’

29 Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Paul is telling the people of Athens that he can do them a great favor: he can tell them who this unknown god is. He first says that this god, which is now spelled with a capital G: God, is our creator, and the creator of the world and everything in it, and that this God will not be found in a temple made by humans. He is also not cared for by humans, as he gives life to everything that breathes. None of this goes directly against Greek beliefs: Paul is couching the biblical story of God in terms that are true to Hebrew scriptures, but in a way that will not upset those to whom he is speaking. Then, Paul makes an oblique reference to the Adam and Eve story of Genesis. He adds that God has commanded all descendants of Adam to seek out God. Interestingly, Greeks, in particular Stoics, did believe that that all people derive from a common ancestor. Paul says that God cares for all people. It’s not known what Paul is referring to when he talks about *“periods and boundaries of their dwelling place”*. He might be referring to the natural four seasons and the specific places on Earth that support human life. Perhaps, whatever he did mean, this part was added because it would appeal to the Greeks

before him, who were philosophical people comfortable with this sort of poetic language. Paul then turns toward a critical concept: why God created us. He says that we are children of God, and in God we find our single purpose for existing. He finishes by telling us that God is not *“like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”* At this point, Paul is finally challenging the beliefs of many of the people before him.

What do we take from this? First of all, Paul reminds us that we should worship a God who made us in his image, not a god we make in our image. Keep in mind that Greek art and architecture was filled with images of their faiths. They created, they bought, they lived among things that they felt were worthy of worship. We do that today. It’s just that we worship a broad class of things, technological devices, fancy vehicles, big homes, designer clothing, jewelry, and in fact, a continuous stream of things that are marketed to us as necessary for our self-respect. We need these things, we tell each other, if we want to be happy, satisfied, and secure. The things we make are supposed to give us the same kind of joy and solace that our ancestors got from God. Furthermore, Paul tells us that there is no “unknown god”. There is in fact only one God. God created us for a reason. We are not accidental, the product of random and uncontrolled events.

Very importantly, here is what comes next, after our passage. Paul continues to speak to the members of the council, saying:

³⁰The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

³²Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Paul, now, confronts these people. He tells them things that they will not agree with: God, the God whom they thought was unknown, commands all of us to repent. We are to stop being greedy and hateful. God will judge us through the hands of a man whom God rose from the dead. At this point, some of the Greek listeners mock him. But others conclude that they want to hear more about this God. Paul then goes out among the people, gaining followers of Christ. By being diplomatic in his approach, by using terms that would be comfortable to his listeners, he has drawn them in and won them over. Paul proves in this passage that he can be an incredibly astute evangelist.

There is something subtler, and very powerful, in this story. Some Christians have argued over the centuries that God has chosen well in advance who is going to be saved. This is called “*predeterminism*”. Methodists do not believe in this. John

Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was an Anglican priest. He believed strongly that predeterminism runs counter to the notion of God's grace and love. He believed that all people receive the grace of God – and all people have the opportunity and the ability to respond to it. I believe this. In our passage Paul is treating these pagan people in Athens the same way he would treat anyone. That's because a fundamental principle of our faith is that while God is indeed sovereign and is in control of everything, God freely gives each of us a choice about what we will believe and how we will act. Ignoring people who, because there is something wrong with their brains, are not able to control their actions, we are all fully capable of following Jesus' two big commandments: 1) Love God with all your heart and mind, and 2) Love your neighbor as yourself. In our passage today, Paul is telling us that all that's holding some people back is that no one has yet introduced God to them. People deserve to be treated with respect, as Paul treated the Athenians. But still, folks need to have open hearts and minds. Here is what happens right after our passage:

***18** After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ²And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

⁵When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

Shaking out his garments would have been a recognizable symbolic act to the Jews around him. Jews would shake the dust off their feet or off their clothes when leaving a pagan or corrupt area. Paul goes from Athens to Corinth. The two cities are about sixty-five miles apart. Paul stays with a couple who had moved to Corinth because the emperor had purged Rome of its Jewish population. Paul occasionally earned money as a tentmaker while he was on his evangelistic travels, and as Aquila and Priscilla were also tentmakers, Paul was able to stay and work with them. Paul went to the local synagogue every Sabbath and preached to both Jews and gentile Greeks. Paul is joined by two assistants, Silas and Timothy. Paul discovers that the Jewish people of Corinth are not open to learning about Christ. Notices that it says that he preached that “the Christ was Jesus”. “Christ” means “anointed one”, or “messiah”. In other words, he was telling the Jews of that city that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, that while Jesus did not form the expected earthly empire, he did indeed usher in a new kingdom, a spiritual kingdom. It turns out that the Jews did not take this news well. We can image why. To the Greeks in Athens, Jesus was a reasonably neutral topic, and God with a capital G meshed okay with their existing beliefs.

But telling these Jews, who had just been expelled from their home city because they were Jews, well, it's not surprising they reviled Paul. Paul reacts angrily, in a fashion that is not at all diplomatic. He seems to be addressing the Jews of Corinth in a far more naïve fashion than the very diplomatic way he preached to the pagans of Athens. Perhaps it's because Paul himself is a Jew and so he's blinded to the fact that they are not accepting Jesus as readily as he did. Also, Jesus came to him on the road to Damascus. The Jews of Corinth haven't had such a personal visit. It seems that here, Paul is being a bit of a bonehead. The result was that he swore off preaching to Jews as a whole. One major lesson is that we should emulate the Paul of Athens, not the Paul of Corinth.

One thing that I have learned as a chaplain in a hospital is to meet people where they are. If you want to connect with someone, if you want to gain their trust, then do not ask them to come to you. Do not ask them to meet you halfway. Meet them where they are, in their space. We, as believers, are in this world for a reason. The grace of God, a gift offered to all but accepted only by some, gives us a calmness that others do not have. The world and our nation are filled with people doing evil things that are extremely difficult to comprehend. But we pass God's grace on to others. We meet people on their ground. We are empathetic, kind, and respectful. We regret our mistakes - and we move to undo

them. Most of all, we have a sense of peace that burns through all the chaos that surrounds us. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for our lives on earth. We thank you for our eternal lives. We ask you to do what the Apostle Paul strove so hard to do, and that is to spread your Word and your grace to others, so that the peace that we feel may be felt by all. Amen.