

“Groping for God”
Acts 17:16-31
4/27/08
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Scene 1 – Athens suffers from cognitive dissonance

I went to a Titan’s game a few years ago. Singing, shouting, hand praises, food and libation, emotion, standing up and sitting down, all on Sunday morning. Sound familiar? Sound like worship? Sunday morning soccer games for children? Yes, we have all done that. Ever sleep in on Sunday mornings? Yes, we have all also done this. All of us have done these things. Lest we be too critical of the Greeks to whom Paul preached, you and I also practice idolatry. We put other things and other people on pedestals higher than God.

In Athens, Paul is in the heart of Greek culture and philosophy. True, its heyday was 2500 years ago, in the days of Socrates and Plato. But even 500 years later, 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus, Athens is still considered the greatest university city of its time. Intellectuals from all of the Western world are drawn to it. People who disagree engage each other in debate.

Then, as now, we frequently define ourselves by saying who we are not. We do this on gun control issues, immigration issues, and genderism. In all of these we polarize ourselves, one against another. And 2000 years before we were born, Athenians polarize themselves into the godless Epicureans and the fatalistic Stoics. The Epicureans who say a suffering world proves there is no God. And the Stoics who believe there is no free will. Even though the Epicureans say there is no God, and even though the Stoics say praying to God is a waste of time, Paul finds a city full of statues of gods, more than in all of the rest of Greece combined. Among this forest of deities Paul even discovers an altar dedicated to an "unknown god."

It is said of that ancient city, there were more gods in Athens than human beings. For a moment, let us look at Athens through Paul’s eyes. Wherever you look, in niches and on pedestals, in temples and on street corners, are gods and half-gods. Busts of gods on every corner, and statues and altars in the courtyard of every home. In a city where one group says there is no god, and another says praying is a waste of time. Psychologists call this cognitive dissonance. To say with the Epicureans there is no god, but to carve an image of God anyway. To say with the Stoics that praying to God is a waste of time, but building an altar and temple to worship God anyway. Paul labels this incoherence as, “groping for God.” Psychologists label this incoherence, “cognitive dissonance.”

Paul points out that regardless whether they called themselves Stoics or Epicureans, and regardless whether they pray or even believe in God, in fact they are so religious, they worship gods they do not even know! Paul stands in the open air like the Stoics, discussing philosophy like Socrates. While on the summit of Mars Hill, in the shadow of the Parthenon, Paul preaches one of the most memorable sermons recorded in the Bible.

To the intelligentsia and leaders of Athens. But he is not giving a message on a familiar subject to a receptive audience, like I am today.

Scene 2 – We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are

The way to insult a physician or a pastor is to tell them they do not love people. And the way to insult a philosopher is to tell him he is a babbler or a parrot. The philosophers of Athens call Paul a babbler, a parrot. And Socrates was executed for proclaiming foreign deities, which they also accuse Paul of doing. Make no mistake about it, Paul's audience is hostile. They invite him to the meeting of the Areopagus, a meeting of the cities' leaders and educated elite. But it is more of a trial. The location of this meeting is at the top of a 377 foot outcropping of stone known as Mars Hill, west of the acropolis hill on which sits the Parthenon, in the center of the city. There is a picture of Mars Hill on the front of the bulletin. You can visit Mars Hill and climb the 16 well worn steps Paul climbed even today. The accused stands on the Rock of Insolence, and the accuser stands on the Rock of No-mercy. Athens' leaders and educated elite stand in judgment, listening to both sides. Unlike those of you who came today, the meeting of the Areopagus on Mars Hill is not a friendly audience. I imagine that the Greek philosophers at the top of Mars Hill say, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" That is, what relevance is the faith of the Jerusalem church to us intellectuals?

I read a novel a few years ago about fictional missionaries from Georgia to the Congo. A pastor took his family and some squash seeds to the jungle of the Congo. He chopped down trees to let the sun in, tilled the ground, and planted his squash seeds from southern Georgia. He watered them every day, and pulled weeds from around them, which was no easy task in the jungle area of the Congo. The seeds germinated, grew lush vines and leaves, and luxuriant flowers. But they never fruited. The flowers withered on the vine. Turns out the Georgia honeybees required to pollinate the squash flowers did not live in the Congo. This is a metaphor for planting a church. If you want your efforts to bear fruit, plant seeds of those plants that are already desired by the neighborhood bees. Don't plant seeds whose flowers are not desired by the bees in your neighborhood. Or they will not get pollinated. They will not get visited. And the plant will perish.

Paul's first appeal to this educated Greek audience, is to point out where Christianity and Stoicism share common words: "The God who made the world and everything in it." "In God we live and move and have our being." These words appear in both the poems of the Stoics and in the New Testament. By finding common ground, Paul gains their trust. Because Paul knows we don't see things as they are. We see them as we are.

Paul's second appeal uses the word offspring. Remember that several half gods, including Hercules, are the offspring of the Greco-Roman gods. Paul said this unknown God is the creator of the cosmos, and since God is our creator, we must be God's offspring. Since we are God's offspring, and we are not made of gold and marble, then neither is this unknown God. Oops! Paul points out the incoherence of worshiping those cold silver, gold, and marble statues.

In the third appeal of his message, Paul discloses his vocation as a Judeo-Christian prophet: It is God's intent that human beings grope for God and find him. Our creating God delivers both the cosmos and the scripture as a message to humankind. A message which delivers humankind from brokenness into wholeness, isolation into community, and fear into generosity. As our creator, God is transcendent. But in a way unique to the faith of Christians, God is also personal. Personal not as a cold silver, gold, and stone image, but as the one who wrapped himself in human flesh and for 33 years became like one of us. Not personal because we can contain or control God. Personal because through Jesus, God truly feels our pain, even the pain of death. And the resurrection of Jesus by God reveals to us that no one, and no just cause, is beyond the power of God's redemption and reconciliation. What has Athens to do with Jerusalem indeed!

Finally, Paul calls for the Greeks on Mars Hill to repent. But repentance does not mean walking on your knees through coals of fire. It does not mean self-flagellation. It means turning from idolatry back to the one true God. The God whose true character is described not in nature, and not in intuition, but only in Scripture. Yes, creation tells us there is a God. But only Scripture tells us the character of God. The Old and New Testaments are related in that we look at the Old Testament through the lens of the New. Through Jesus' eyes.

Successful evangelists like Paul bridge the gap between who we are and who our community is. But successful evangelism also addresses diversity within the community.

Scene 3 – Who is our community?

Mithraism was a growing religion 2000 years ago because it appealed to the most powerful individuals in the western world at the time, the Roman centurions. But this religion failed when it faced the new Christian religion. One of its reasons for its failure is that women and children were excluded from Mithra's temples. Because Mithraism was a good old boys' club. But Christianity evangelized not just the 35% of the population who were adult males, but all of the population, including women and children. Christianity evangelized 100% of the population, not just the adult males.

Paul says God gives to all mortals life and breath. Not to one demographic or another. Not just to adult males. To women and children as well. And Paul says God gives assurance of the resurrection to all. And Jesus said, suffer the children.

You see, God is not a tribal God. God is not the God of the few. God is the God of us all. All are called to Jesus. All demographics, children, youth, and their parents, on the one hand, and BABY BOOMERS, and THEIR parents on the other hand. God calls our church to evangelize not the elect, the few, the proud, the baby boomers and their parents. But all of God's children, both the young and young-at-heart alike.

Conclusion

Church is not a building, it is an assembly of people. We bring people to sit not in a building, but at Jesus' feet. Some say a building is a resource to be used only if necessary in promoting mission. The church is an assembly of evangelists.

At this time, Brentwood First reaches out to 40% of Brentwood.

Weiling helps lead a weekly Bible study at the Heritage at Brentwood on Thursdays at 4PM. Gladys, Katy, and Karen help lead worship at Somerville NH on Sundays at 3:30 PM. We are communicating with hospice to start a grief group for widows at our church. Yes, Brentwood First brings the parents of baby boomers to Jesus. But parents of Baby Boomers account for only 10% of Brentwood.

We are beginning dance lessons at our church this Tuesday, and you are invited to come, even if you have two left feet. By planting seeds of flowers that appeal to baby boomers, Brentwood First brings these baby boomers into contact with our church. But Baby Boomers account for only 30% of Brentwood.

To reach the 30% of Brentwood under the age of 20, and the 30% of Brentwood who are their parents, we need new ideas. If you have such ideas, please give them to one of the session members on the front of the bulletin.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...