

Sermon at Athens

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So, the Athenians “spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” Or, more literally from the Greek, “spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” Sound like any folks we know? Just like us, here’s a group of folks that spent their time waiting for “The Next Big Thing.” In their case, the “something new” was more likely in the world of ideas or world events than in the world of technology – the Romans were more into technology than the Greeks – but still, in many ways, we never change. We’re always looking – listening – for something new.

And something else we all have in common: we all want to hedge our bets. If you have an investment portfolio, it may be a mix of stuff allocated to cover you whether markets go up or go down. And so it was, as Paul discovered as he wandered the streets of Athens, that they had shrines for every god conceivable – just in case. They even had a shrine dedicated “to an unknown god” – again, just in case. Well, I hope each of us is involved with worship and God’s people and God’s church for reasons more hopeful and convinced than “just in case.”

This morning we have come to Acts 17 in our sermon series. As we heard last week from Pastor Jonna, Paul and his team have just crossed the Straits of Dardanelles, that very narrow body of water that separates the Middle East and Turkey from Europe. Thus, the Gospel has now arrived in Europe – Macedonia, in particular, beginning in its leading city, the Roman colony of Philippi. Things started off well, as you heard last week. Paul headed not for a synagogue but, as God had called him to do, to a place of prayer along a river where Gentiles were found, including Lydia, a business woman who becomes the first convert in Europe. Paul and Silas then got into trouble ... not because of conflict with folks in the synagogue but rather because of casting out an evil spirit. Yet even though that lands them in prison, the end result is the

jailer and his family come to faith in Christ and Paul and Silas are eventually released.

But now in Acts 17, Paul seems to return to his old habits. Leaving Philippi, they head for Thessalonica where, rather than heading to a river bank or a market place, Paul heads immediately to a synagogue. But wait: hadn't God emphasized that he was supposed to be going to the Gentiles? Well, the results were perhaps predictable: things again turn violent at the synagogue, and among the few that came to faith were a number of *Gentiles*. They immediately hustle Paul out of harm's way and send him to Berea where, surprise surprise, he heads once again immediately to the synagogue. Now, things seem to start out just fine this time; we are told:

the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

But when the folks back in Thessalonica heard about this, they came down and stirred things up and, once again, a riot developed. And, once again, Paul then had to be hustled out of Dodge, though Silas and Timothy were able to remain behind. So, the Bereans brought Paul to Athens where he settled down to wait for Silas and Timothy.

Now Athens was a major city, of course, and here it gets interesting. He briefly starts with a synagogue again – yes, even Paul seems at first to have a rather slow and shallow learning curve – but this time we read:

So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.

This was Athens, after all. And, as we read, we find these Greek philosophers taking an interest in what Paul is saying:

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? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean."

So, at this point, Paul leaves the synagogue behind and heads to the Areopagus, a location in Athens known for trials of things both judicial and philosophical – exactly the kind of place that God had in mind for him. With his fine education in things both religious as well as classical, Paul felt prepared for this moment. Having answered God’s call to come to Macedonia, and thus enter Europe for the first time, Paul has now come to the heart of Western intellectual culture: Athens. And yet even here he finds people hedging their bets – both intellectually and spiritually.

As we heard, when he first arrived, he had wandered down a street that could be called an “avenue of putting eggs in many baskets” – a street lined with altars to many and various gods. Sort of like folks who make generous donations to both candidates in an election to be sure they are taken care of no matter who wins. He even found one altar inscribed “to an unknown god” – just in case, don’t you know?

So, Paul now has his audience of Greek philosophers and launches into a rather spectacular sermon.

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

And Paul was off and running.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything

Rather, God

is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

So Paul waxes eloquent among these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, pulling out all the intellectual stops and even quoting from their own poets. Finally, at the very end, he touches upon the resurrection.

Well, it's hard to know just what to make of all of this. After all is said and done, we read:

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from among them. But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

A few folks respond and that's all we hear. Did the philosophers "hear him again about this," as they suggest? There's no mention of that. The very next verse simply reads, "After this he left Athens and went to Corinth," that large, wild and woolly seaport city we heard about in a sermon series at the beginning of the year. In Corinth, Timothy and Silas join him once again. All in all, it seems a rather quiet exit from Athens. Nothing more is ever said about his impressive sermon or, indeed, of Athens itself. Paul and his team continue on through other cities and then revisit the congregations they had planted in Judea, Syria, Turkey and Greece and, of course, eventually ending up in Rome as we will hear in the next two weeks.

So just what happened in Athens? Well, as we look back at what takes place here in Acts 17, several things strike me this morning. First of all, there's simply **the humanity of Paul**. We all have our ups and downs as we go through life trying to follow where God leads us and trying to grow in faith and maturity at the same time. Paul was no different. Have you ever *finally* learned an important lesson from God – something you realize he'd been trying to teach you for years – only to find yourself falling right back into the old patterns a week or so later? Yeah, me, too. I guess the *real* question is "How many times?"

Well, as we've been hearing this morning, Paul was no different. I suppose I shouldn't take comfort in that fact – but I guess I do because it tells me even *Paul* struggled in this way and, if so ... well, I guess there's hope for me, too. Go to the Gentiles, God said, but Paul headed immediately to the synagogues each time where things went south very quickly. As I often say, the Bible has no super heroes – except God himself. All the rest of the folks were pretty much like you and me – and God just patiently worked with them like he does with you and me.

And that's another thing: **the patience of God**. God never gave up on Paul. God never gave up on him even when, at least at first, he seemed rather impervious to God's direction and resistant to change. But one of the definitions of "grace," you know, is "God's love which never gives up on us." I like that – and I live in that conviction and hope – God's love which never gives up on us. Our sermon series is on the book of Acts. That book's full name is the Acts of the Apostles, but, as many point out, it really should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit because that's who's busy here. It's not the story of Paul or Peter or Stephen or Philip or Lydia or Priscilla or any of the other names we've been hearing. Rather, it's the story of the God who doesn't give up on us.

Not in the Garden of Eden, not when Jesus was rejected and crucified, not when Paul kept aiming at synagogues instead of market places – and not when you and I prove to be just as bull-headed and, quite frankly, disobedient. The patience of God. Right from the beginning, God knew that Saul was going to be a challenge. Remember how, after Saul's Damascus Road experience left him blind for a few days, God sent Ananias to open his eyes? What did God say to the very reluctant Ananias? Not just, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles" but also "for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." I suspect God chose Saul because he knew his strength of character, his intelligence, his education – but God also knew that learning a new obedience was going to be a painful experience for Saul.

Learning obedience. That comes hard for you and me, too, doesn't it? We don't talk a lot about obedience in the Lutheran church because it so quickly gets twisted into legalism – but it shouldn't. As I read this morning's texts, I hear not only of *the humanity of Paul* and *the patience of God* but also of this challenging matter of **the obedience of the Christian** – that obedience to which Paul was called and to which you and I are called, as well. And I say it's challenging because of what can become the dark underbelly of obedience. That dark underbelly? Legalism. Legalism says "I have to obey what God says *so that* he will love me." Legalism says, "If you want to get saved, you have to jump

through hoops.” But the *obedience of the Christian* starts by saying, “God *already* loves me. I am a child of God because Jesus jumped through all the hoops one could imagine ... for me and for you.” The obedience of the Christian doesn’t lay down rules and requirements but asks two questions? The first, “How can I return thanks to God for all he has done for me?” And the second, “How can I be most effective?” In those things in which God would have me involved, how can I return thanks to him in doing them and how can I be most *effective* in so doing? Another way of approaching this might be to ask, as a child of God, saved by grace through faith, what kinds of routines or practices or habits or disciplines would make me the most effective disciple that I can ever be? Because that’s the kind of disciple I want to be.

On occasion, this might even mean putting aside a project or a skill set in which we pride ourselves, and picking up or even returning to some other thing that we’ve felt God calling us to but have avoided or even just sort of forgotten. I actually think that’s what happened to Paul after Athens. In that impressive Athens sermon, Paul waxed eloquent, using phrases of Greek culture and philosophy, quoting their poets, and so on. It really showed who *he* was and what *he* had accomplished in life. But it’s hard to point to anything really coming of this sermon – a sermon filled with *human* wisdom and which put Paul’s broad education on display.

But we don’t read of a church being established in Athens, for instance. And there’s no letter of Paul to the Athenians as there are to the churches at Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, Rome. Rather, we find him leaving Athens rather quietly – humbly and thoughtfully, perhaps – and heading for Corinth, where, as opposed to Athens, he ended up staying and preaching and teaching for 18 months. As you may remember from our sermon series at the beginning of the year on 1 Corinthians, this resulted in a very strong and even feisty church coming into existence.

What has caught my attention in all this is the way that Paul then later began his first letter to this new church at Corinth. What he writes suggests to me that, after preaching that impressive sermon filled with human wisdom in Athens, Paul might have sort of left that great city

with his tail between his legs, eventually reaching Corinth and entering the city with “fear and trembling,” as he puts it. For at the beginning of 1 Corinthians chapter 2, we read of Paul’s arrival in Corinth, fresh from Athens:

When I came to *you*, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

This, coming immediately after the sermon at Athens, speaks to me of a Paul who had learned a back-to-the-basics lesson in obedience. Oh, he still remained both Saul and Paul, as we have heard before. And he could still fly off the handle on occasion, or head like a misguided missile to the synagogue rather than the market place. Again, it gives me comfort to know that I’m not the only one to do that sort of thing. But in these words from the beginning of 1 Corinthians 2, I hear the result of not just *the humanity of Paul* or even just *the patience of God* but also the healthy *obedience of a Christian* – a Christian bearing the names of both Saul and Paul who was learning to depend “not on the wisdom of men but on the power of God” ... who simply wanted his life to give thanks to God and to be as effective a disciple as he could.

May that be your goal and mine as well as we live in that firm hope of “Jesus Christ and him crucified,” children of God seeking to give *thanks* to God for all he has done for us and continues to do daily ... as we seek to be as effective as we can as followers of Jesus, knowing, growing and going as disciples in his name.

Let us pray