

August 14, 2005 Community Presbyterian Church.

In the children's sermon, I passed around some post cards of Hindu gods and goddesses, than I held up a wooden carving of Jesus as the King and asked the children what these were. They knew neither the words idol nor icon, but one little guy knew the concept was of a "symbol" and he pointed to a communion cup on the banner Ev had made for the wall, and thought he thought of the cup as a "shovel" he clearly understood the concept of "symbol". I was most amazed. Now for the other sermon.

Introduction:

This is my first time to preach a sermon on Acts 17, but the sermon preparation started back in May when Helen and I attended a church in Kyoto, Japan where the priest talked about this same passage. It seemed appropriate because we had been walking around that 1000 year old city, looking a number of different statues of the "Buddha" and we would walk through many more places in India where "gods" were presented in a surprising number of ways...all of which Paul could have used his same sermon.

A month later, we got to Athens; and we walked on the very same little streets Paul must have walked up and down when he was in Athens. I could feel his steps this summer in a special way, but unlike Hollywood there are no "star" status markers in the sidewalk...but Paul deserved one, perhaps along with Plato, Socrates and the great writers of tragedy and comedy.

Let's go back to Paul in the first century. You may remember this was toward the end of the second missionary journey, before he went back to Jerusalem. When he got to Athens he was a tried and true apostle, having traveled over the space of half the Roman Empire which reached from Jerusalem to Rome, for he was not yet to get to Rome.

No one knows how long Paul stayed in Athens, but he had been with Silas and Timothy for some time in Thessalonica and after leaving Athens he would go to Corinth, and he stay there he stayed for a year and a half. To both those cities, he wrote letters. If he wrote one to Athens, certainly someone there would have held onto it, but we have no record of what he would have written. So this passage in Acts is

Luke's rendering of Paul's speech (defense) there and it is wonderful to imagine, especially after visiting the city again this summer

For one thing, in Athens Paul did not provoke persecution or imprisonment. What does that prove? Well, perhaps the Athenians were accustomed to having visitors come and talk with them. We can say that the Athenians were under the rule of Rome at the time and no longer did they have to be threatened by outside ideas...like Paul's would have been. Also they had been defeated by the Spartans centuries before, so they were not the center of the world from a kind of global business perspective. Nonetheless, the Romans loved Greek art and architecture and today in Athens a visitor can see that influence. So the City of Athens really would seem more like what it was in Paul's day than most of the other places he went. There is the Acropolis built in the 5th century. There is the Areopagus and there is Mars Hill, all of which are walks done in a day. Even if Paul was only there for one overnight, he would have had time to enact what Luke said about him, and he certainly made better use of his time than I have ever done in Athens, for I have not had such encounters as he had...maybe next time.

II. Exegesis by Bill. Let's go directly to the text in Acts 17:16ff. My brother in San Diego took me to his church last week saying that he likes pastors to preach from a text, not from their lives, but at his church that day a guest speaker appeared who pretty much told us what it was like to be a military chaplain to Marines in Iraq, two times he has been deployed now...and that sermon told me more about Marines than it did the text in James...which he mentioned only twice.

So, Bill, back to the text. When we encounter Paul he was "waiting in Athens" (Good News Version, English Bible) for Silas and Timothy. But he noticed that Athens was "full of idols", Idols being a bad word in English (θεωρουντος κατειδωλον) being the root of idol our word. It carries a negative meaning in using the word in English these days, so I used a more neutral word when looking at one "Icon". But Paul meant the negative one.

Next we find Paul "dialoging" (διαλεγεται v. 17) in the synagogue with the Jews and Gentiles who worship God, which shows some Greeks were attracted to the teachings of the Jews, or the Jewish girls there, or they were on a field trip from the University there, started by Plato

and they were writing a paper about what Jews teach. Then Paul moves out to the public square (αγορα), still there by the way) every day...so he was there more than one day it seems. (πασαν ημεραν)

Next verse(18) some Epicurean and Stoics stop by and get into a debate with Paul. Luke uses here the same dialogue form, which he has used already in his first work “The Gospel according to Luke”

Here the Epicureans and Stoics replace the scribes and Pharisees, but they are different from each other as we shall see later. The Epicureans believed that life should be full of pleasure...don't worry about tomorrow, “get back your big tax refund and spend it fast, who cares if we are running up a national debt today which our children will have to pay for.” My hometown has a restaurant named the “Epicurean”, which would mean that eating is a pleasure. Redlands has many such restaurants even if not named that.

The Stoics were quite different. They believed that life is hard and we must endure. Start a war in Iraq and stick it out to the end, don't bring the troops home anytime in the near future. Hardship means we will be stronger if we are able to stick it out. So a few people get killed, that is the way life is. Anyway we need cheaper oil (oops there you go again, Bill, giving your own view,) anyway it is not the Stoics we need more oil, they would just walk and be strong, it is the Epicureans who need more oil for their larger and larger chariots to have more slaves on board to fan them while they ride and eat in comfort, but no cell phones yet.

Some of the critics say “what is the ignorant show off trying to say? Not me, Paul they meant.

Another said, “He seems to be talking about foreign gods.” (ζενων δαιμονιων) for that Greek guy realized Paul was speaking about something new to the Greeks, i.e. Jesus and his resurrection.

So these Greeks were warm hearted and welcoming, as indeed Athenians are today, I can say from experience; indeed, they took Paul to the Areopagus, still known there by the same name, with probably the same little winding streets leading up to the place. The gathering there was not so much like our city council where voting would take place, but rather it was more likely then just a place to have discussions, like this one Luke records. The people there that

day were a mixed group-- Epicureans, Stoics, Jews, and other unnamed sorts, who “spent all their time telling and hearing his latest new thing”. Sound like any place you go for news, or the “Good Morning America” show on TV...a high commercialized event of the same kind. Or ! The tonight show, for one of those evening hosts would want a man like Paul to answer some questions.

But now Paul used the opportunity to preach a sermon, wrote Luke.

Paul pretends that he sees the Athenians as very religious, for as he walked and looked at the places to worship, he even found an altar “To an unknown god” (αγνωστω θεω) from which we get the words AGNOSTIC and THEO as in THEOLOGY.(v.23

Luke wrote that Paul confidently affirms that he knows this God whom the Greeks did NOT know by name as His God who was the creator of the world. Well, some Greeks must believed that at least from the time of Aristotle, who assumed that the created order had some point of beginning and God was that origin. He tells the Greeks that “from one man,” God had created “all races of mankind and made them live throughout the whole world.” (v. 26) “Good,” some of the Greeks listening that day must have thought. For they had pondered these same questions, and for at least 300 years, since the time of Alexander the Great, who conquered as much of the earth as he could, believed that his soldiers should all have “war brides” wherever they went, affirming the oneness of mankind, (the whole world as a “household” from which we Christians have the word “ecumenical” their Greek word as the origins of thinking about the way a household or a country spends its wealth.

Paul affirmed that God had “fixed beforehand the exact times and the limits of the places where they (people) would live.” (προσ τεταγμενους καιρους και τας οροθεσιας της κατοικιας αυτων)

That line (v. 26b written by Luke) was a sudden reminder to me even late on this Friday night of something which I had not thought about for a long time ---that were I was to live was fixed by God, having been born in North Carolina and fleeing in a jobless state first to Missouri and then to California. I needed Luke (Paul’s reminder, I

guess) So if Luke or Paul is right, then it was God who brought me here. I knew that we prayed to get out of Missouri, for 3 or 4 years, but perhaps this morning my prayer should be “Thank you, God, for making it not only possible, but in your eternal plan (at least beforehand that I) and you my puzzled listeners to this sermon are also here with me.

Now Paul moved to the line that God is actually not far from anyone of us “In him we live and move and exist (have our being) Here I am reminded I learned this from Paul not Augustine. I know this comes from somewhere but not the New Testament writers nor the Old Testament ones, where?

Then Paul argues that since we are God's children (Gk. γενος) we should not think of materials such as gold, silver or stone (χρυσω η αργυρω λιθωθ – all the favorite substances which we saw all spring and summer of artists) to make God with, all of these made by the art and skill of man (χαραγματι τεχνησ και εσθυμησεως απθρωπου) Actually these words seem to reflect some respect for the creativity of human skill and artistic rendering, so Paul is not against art as such according to Luke, just the notion that God could be ever captured by human construction.(v.29).

A jump in the speech of Paul comes now as he says that God overlooked (υπεριδον) the times when he was not known by people but now he commands to all men to repent (μετανοειν) a familiar word in the teachings of Jesus and Paul, I should add. Then (v. 31) the sermon writer introduced the idea of God as judge of the whole world (οικουμενεν)-that wonderful word again) in justice (δικαιοσυνη) in the one person he has chosen--whom he has raised from the dead...Paul never got the chance to mention Jesus Christ in this sermon, for Luke tells us that Paul was interrupted, for after all this was Athens, and the dialog motive involved responses sometimes "making fun" of the speaker as with Aristophanes in his comedy. But this was not intended by Luke to be funny. And the event is concluded with some of the Greeks saying "We want you to speak again about this." So Paul leaves, perhaps with an intention to return, but not that day or that trip through Greece for he headed to Corinth, which would lead us to another bigger story there by the way.

Luke concluded that two people Dionysius, a member of the council, and Damaris, a woman (note how Luke cites his sources for his account of the event, and that he has both a man and a woman -Luke likes women). Were they to be the beginning of an Athenian church? Paul may have written them a letter, but it did not survive, and Helen and I can affirm that Athens today is filled with Christian Churches, even a "Presbyterian-one" just across from the Roman Hadrian's Arch, where you can listen on a hearing aide in English. All the hymns they sang this June day were known to us, even if they would not have been to Paul.

**Part III In seminary we learned to make an application to life in a sermon. First let me say that this research so far was all my exegesis, and let me turn to what others have written about this sermon of Paul with the Greeks in Athens. In a chapter called "an Unknown God, Hastings (p. 158 finds several poems from Brit Lit. That shows that God can indeed be found in nature, so that all would have known him, including the Greeks William Watson to wit:
Above the clud, beneath the sod, the Unknown God, the Unknown God.**

**But Swinburne, "most brilliant of all".
"We have said to the dreams that caressed us,
The terrors that smot us—"good night and good-bye."**

Thus Hastings affirms that the dream of God which came to men in the form of religion was a summons to a holier life, and the offer of forgiveness."

Indeed, I would agree that could be the meaning of the sermon Paul offered in Athens. Hastings found respect by Paul toward the Greeks in the "form of genuine piety" (so the word used in the original Greek "worship" implies.

By the way these words were written in 1911, showing the richness of the U. of R. Library.

I also found, J. Fitzmeyer (Jesuit Biblical scholar) in 1998 wrote a "Comment" (p. 602 in which he says there is no explicit quotation of

the OT in this speech=: instead a Greek poet, Aratus, quoted (as he answered by question above) "For Dibelius, it is a Hellenistic speech about the true knowledge God to be derived from the world." So the "theology of the Areopagus speech is absolutely foreign to Paul's theology is foreign to the entire NT. (Studies,71)

Note the bravery of this commentator, saying Paul did not give this speech. But I responded by thinking,

Why not? Paul could have tried this on the Greeks, and even if he did not found a church there, or use these ideas elsewhere, Luke could indeed have learned from these sources he mentioned what they remembered as an affirmation of Greek religion and finding God in nature. Then I remembered Paul did not get to finish his speech anyway, so maybe he would have pulled out some of his old letters and read them."

The most delightful part of my research this week was to find a festschrift for a professor of mine at Yale- Paul Schubert which I have had for 39 years, all about Luke and Acts. There a German I once heard as well, Hans Conzelmann, who knew my professor well, wrote the word δεισιδαιμον doesn't mean "superstitious" but rather should be "devout." A Christian reader, like us, may hear "the irony in it", however. He continues that Paul would not have used "irony" in this way, nor should a Christian missionary in the world today. Thus, as in the sermon by the Christian in Kyoto in May, I would agree that it is not our purpose to make reference to other people's religion with negative tone...even if we might sometimes feel it.

So let me move toward a conclusion, an application we might say. What do we learn from Luke or Paul today from study of the speech in Athens?

The tone of the speech was positive. The speaker/writer assume that the Greeks (and here I should say, Buddhist, Hindus, even atheists have a working belief which carries them through the difficulties of their lives, as our belief in Christ carries us). I may not wish to worship as they do, nor they as I do. But I can therefore continue to take people to distant places with quite different values, without trying to impose mine.

But in so far as they might wish to know what I believe, I can say with Luke/Paul that that God made us all, from the same stuff, “Ha Adama—red dirt” or same blood, which does flow in all our veins. He has given us this time to live on this planet in the same years.

He has a time for judgment of the world with “justice” and gives the chance to turn from “evil ways” as individuals, and I believe as “nations” as in “moral man and immoral society (a la Niebuhr).

For me the proof of his justice even promise of his care (if not in this passage, certainly elsewhere through Scripture) is that he had chosen a man—Paul names him elsewhere as “Christ Jesus” and affirmed that God has raised him from the dead.

In those promises I was created, move and have my being—my meaning. Should they be yours as well, I can rejoice with you....