Sunday, 5/17/20

**Acts 17:16-34**

16While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17So 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. 18A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19Then 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? 20You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” 21(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

22Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what 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 human hands. 25And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any 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 human 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 everyone by raising him from the dead.”

32When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33At that, Paul left the Council. 34Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

**Sermon**

Acts is Luke’s continuation of the story he began in his Gospel. Jesus ascends to heaven in the first chapter, the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples in the second, and the rest of Acts describes how the disciples became apostles, spreading the word about Jesus from one corner of Jerusalem to other, far-flung places around the Roman Empire. Along the way Saul, a Pharisee whose mission in life was to stamp out this new religion around what people called “the Way,” meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and becomes a follower. We know from Paul’s letters and from Acts that he was the Apostle to the Gentiles who started many of the churches outside of Jerusalem, and that his teachings were the foundation for generations of Christians. We also know from Acts that the process of spreading the word didn’t always go smoothly: as much as readers tend to assume that the apostles’ preaching was always met with long lines of people waiting to be baptized, it didn’t always work that way. Paul founded several churches, but we know from his letters that the churches squabbled; we also know that Paul spent time in prison because of the message he preached: sometimes the synagogues kicked him out and the gentiles arrested him for presenting a Christ that was a rival to Caesar. Jesus may have told his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” in Matthew 28, but telling people about Jesus wasn’t for the faint of heart.

But of course we know that. Paul and the other apostles are heroes of the faith in the minds of most Christians, but people who share their faith this publicly now are seen as pushy and rude. We have trouble talking about God publicly now. The idea of “sharing faith” can mean worshiping the same God together and caring for one another because that’s what we think Jesus would do, or it can mean aggressively pushing your beliefs on people who probably didn’t even ask about it. I don’t know how many times someone has knocked on my door or stopped me on the sidewalk to ask me if I know Jesus and offer to pray for my salvation. Even learning that I’m a pastor doesn’t stop their spiel. A fellow pastor told me a story of being stopped on a train by someone who asked him if he knew Jesus. My colleague answered, “Yes, let me tell you about him.” Given that opportunity what would most of us say?

Our problems with talking about God are pretty evident in society. Those of us that go to church talk to each other about the old days, when going to church was common, and we ask why more people don’t go to church. Churchgoers can have this discussion all day—but how do we talk to those who don’t see the value in church? We all have dreams of a Billy Graham Crusade in our church with converts lining up to be baptized, but too often the church in general is more interested in defending the privileged place it once had in society than in helping people understand what the value of the church is. (A past parishioner once came to me complaining about the denomination’s insurance plan covering abortions in some cases and a presbytery asking a Muslim to open a meeting with prayer. She told me, “I’m tired of my religious liberties being taken away.” I admit that I didn’t know how to respond. This is how the church too often thinks: what about our rights? Why don’t people show up to help us cover our budget? What did Billy Graham do? For that matter, what did Paul do?

It strikes me immediately that Paul is quite willing to talk about his faith publicly, but he’s able to talk about it without being angry or defensive. And it’s not because nothing bothers him: Luke says that Paul walked through Athens and “was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” Idols are forbidden in the Old Testament and a sure sign that someone doesn’t worship the God of Jesus Christ, and Paul is bothered by this. He doesn’t view being publicly interrogated about his beliefs as an attack on his religious liberties or character, either: when he’s questioned at a meeting of the Areopagus, he’s ready to explain himself, and he wins converts. He gets his point across partly because he doesn’t approach his questioners with outrage: Paul isn’t offended that the Athenians have idols to other gods, or that they don’t believe what he does. He begins his spiel by saying, “I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” Paul could have framed the idols as an egregious violation of Torah law, but instead he interprets them as a sign that the Athenians are seeking something larger than themselves to worship; they’re open to hearing about Jesus or they wouldn’t have questioned him, so Paul explains the faith that he has in Jesus.

This lesson is worth taking to heart: even in a time when most people don’t go to church, people are looking for meaning. People are open to God, if not always to the church. There are a lot of reasons for that: people don’t trust institutions as much as they used to, people socialize differently now than they used to, and the church has often ignored Paul’s message of relating to people and judged people who don’t do what we think they should. But many people are more open to God than we realize. And God wants to be found: Paul tells the Athenians that “27God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any 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.’”