

**Sixth Sunday of Easter (Easter 6A) - May 25, 2014**  
**Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

Our reading from the book of Acts gives an account of Paul in Athens on one of his missionary journeys. Earlier in this chapter we hear that, initially, Paul had sought out the small Jewish community there, and had spoken (and argued) in their synagogue. But he didn't just focus his work there at the synagogue. He also went into the wider cosmopolitan city, into the marketplace (or "Agora" as it was called)—the civic center—where a wide variety of people were selling things and ideas. As he engaged people in conversation and built relationships, he was acknowledged by some as having something new and interesting to say; and they escorted him to Mars Hill (or in Greek, the Areopagus) to hear what "new teaching" he was presenting. As the account in Acts states (in the verse preceding today's reading), "Now all the Athenians and foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21).

We're also told in this chapter that as Paul walked around the city he, "was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). He had seen the Temple of Mars as well as the Parthenon with the statue of Minerva, goddess of wisdom. As he wandered about he would have seen, as a former colleague of mine, Bill Tully, put it, "images of various deities, small temples, open-air altars, gods in the marketplace—quick-fire gods who promised immediate relief. Gods for the greedy, gods for ecstatic indulgence, gods of nationalism, gods with all the answers, gods of magic, gods of institutions, gods to bolster the Roman political system (which ruled Greece in those days). Gods to keep the poor happily poor, gods for the curious. All the gods [with a small 'g'], in short, that we still have—sometimes in the marketplace, sometimes even in the churches."<sup>i</sup>

Wherever he traveled, Paul was concerned to help people find an enduring foundation to anchor their spiritual quests for meaning and truth. Today we also face the tendency and temptation to go for an easy solution, and the newest faddish thinking, especially in some theological circles. To scale down the search for truth to something easy and new is as old as the spiritual quest of humanity, as we see in this more than 1900 year old chapter of Acts.<sup>ii</sup>

Now, as much as Paul may have been "deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols" and fads, he also shows an amazing regard for the people and perspectives he encounters. In fact, he appears to be unusually sensitive, patient and surprisingly humble. He recognizes the inherent spirituality amongst the diverse seekers he encounters in Athens. He sees that they worship at the altars and sacred temples in ways that draw out their deep longings and profound joy. He finds in them a searching for meaning and truth and community that occurs across different cultures in every age, and he respects that deeply.

As Sam Portaro points out, Paul's evangelism was fundamentally relational.<sup>iii</sup> We see this not only in this account from Acts but also in each of Paul's letters. He knew that his most persuasive power was to be found in his relationships. When Paul shared the gospel with the Athenians he obviously had spent some time among them. His knowledge of their lives and their faith is very evident in his remarks to them. Jesus, too, built upon relationships as the foundation for his own evangelization, creating and spending time with not only a smaller group of twelve, but also a larger group who were also called his disciples. Even on those occasions when he preached to large gatherings, those who had gathered were brought there by family, friends, neighbors and colleagues, expressly to hear what he had to say, which is quite different from what we often conceive of as evangelistic enterprise.<sup>iv</sup> Portaro notes that, "Discipleship and evangelism have always rested upon a foundation of relationships. It seems so simple and so natural, yet is apparently the hardest thing for us to do. We would rather market religion to strangers than share our faith with a friend at work or in class, with a neighbor or acquaintance, even a sibling...We have ample and conclusive evidence...that whole nations are brought to faith when faith is shared among friends."<sup>v</sup>

So, holding both his deep distress and his deep regard in tension, from this relational basis, Paul shows forth a generous-minded, inclusive evangelism. He says, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god'" (Acts 17:22-23). Paul uses this as an opportunity to reach across to his fellow seekers. Archaeologists point out that this altar "to an unknown god" had been erected about three centuries before Paul's visit, during the time of a plague. The desperate Athenians had not been able to find a cure, nor had their appeals to all their known gods had any effect. So they erected this altar to an unknown god—a god who might have the powers of curing beyond that of their known gods. This became the opening for Paul to address the non-Jewish Athenians, saying that he and they had something in common. He does not tell them they are wrong, stupid, sinful, idolatrous or pagan.<sup>vi</sup> Rather, he meets them where they are and says that they and he have something in common, this unknown god who is the One he already believes in. Referring to this altar, he says, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). And then, rather than quoting the Hebrew Scriptures, he pays homage to *their* religious heritage and practices, as he reaches across all the more by quoting their own poets and philosophers—in fact, in our reading we hear quoted, specifically, Epimenides of Knossos, Homer, Plato, Hesiod and others, including the Stoic poet, Aratus of Cilicia, who had written a poem called *Phaenomena* (5) around 270 B.C.E. In that poem, Aratus wrote of the god "in whom we live and move and have our being." With what Krister Stendahl called "holy envy," Paul expresses appreciation for their insights as he adopts and adapts some of their images and fundamental principles into his own. We are not so different after all, he is saying to the Athenians. We are all on a search for God. As Paul says, we all "search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us." (Acts 17:27). We have more in common than what divides us. "For 'in him we [all] live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:28).<sup>vii</sup>

Paul's generous and relational example is the vocation of every Christian, and it's the vocation of the church. So many great truths and images found in our own religious tradition did not, in fact, originate within that tradition. From the first book of our Bible in which Israel adapted and adopted insights about God from earlier Babylonian stories of the world's creation and a great flood, to the end of the last book of our Bible that concludes, "Even so, Lord Jesus, come," we find an unending revelation of many truths learned, adapted and adopted from many sources over a long time—with still more to learn. As Sam Portaro puts it, "The presumption of Truth's exclusivity is a fundamental error of nearly every religion and of Christianity practiced in many ages. Such arrogance is offensive to the world, and according to our heritage it is offensive to God as well. Paul acknowledges that our knowledge is always partial, continually awaiting the final revelation...beyond the bondage of time and the limitations of human imagination."<sup>viii</sup> Contrary to the notably ungenerous, often religious, public voices in our world who, preferring certainty to truth, insist: "We're right; you're wrong. Our way or the highway"—Paul instead reminds us that we have something in common<sup>ix</sup>, and that we have something to learn from others. So we're called to act generously, as did Paul. If we're approaching others with whom we'd like to share our faith and values and how we've been turned on to the religious quest, we should look for what we already have in common.

Yet, there was still a necessary edge to Paul. The practical example of his interactions in Athens, and his willingness to find common ground by his generosity of spirit was coupled paradoxically by his willingness to call an idol an idol. Paul insisted that it's possible, after all, to find, and not just seek, truth, and to do so amongst mixed multitudes out in the marketplace, the public arena, instead of simply in church. Paul had a strong sense of his own identity as centered in Christ, and this allowed him to interact generously and respectfully with diverse peoples. And sure, it was when Paul got to the story of Jesus of Nazareth that he lost some of his audience, as this same chapter also states. But that didn't stop him as he went on to ignite small communities of faith throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>x</sup>

So, in conclusion, Paul appreciated, acknowledged and celebrated what his Athenian friends had to share. He did not attempt to destroy, or raise up, a rival or successor to it. And he added their experiences and insights to his own, and then engaged them with regard and respect, with his own experience and insight now informed by theirs. In doing so, as Sam Portaro states, Paul "did not constrict Christianity's claim; [rather,] he widened Christianity's embrace."<sup>xi</sup> And in so doing, he realized—made real—Jesus' parting gift of the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of truth," as promised in our gospel lesson (John 14:16-18)—the Spirit of Christ who has us constantly seeking further understanding. Paul knew that there is a reason that there isn't a great rush to God with a capital "G" and away from idols and fads. It's hard work, the search for truth, in contrast to the easier search for certainties and simplistic half-truths. When we share God's love in Christ's "Spirit of truth," again let us remember that Christ came fundamentally to rebuild the bonds of our common *humanity*, not to impose a Christianity. And it is only when we reach out and discover the *common* ground, that we are ever really standing on *holy* ground.<sup>xii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> William McD. Tully, “Googling God” (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church, May 1, 2005)

<sup>ii</sup> “Now all the Athenians and foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” It could be said that Athens was where the New Age movement began—now more than 2500 years ago! That’s why, in New Age revivals in each generation since, the important thing to remember is that there’s rarely anything new! For example, standard New Age ways to answer big questions include astrology and divination—ancient notions that you can search lifeless and distant stars and other inanimate objects here on earth for signs of what will happen and how to live your life. Paul’s understanding is that our searches for truth and meaning are not made intelligible by the stars or other inanimate objects; but rather, stars and inanimate objects are made intelligible by our minds inspired God, the Spirit of truth. Of course, astrology and divination are just two of many ways that people scuttle the search, stop too soon and grab on to something that is simple, comforting—and self-deceiving. Now it’s easy to pick on astrology and divination. What if, instead, I picked on the prevalent belief in, say, the efficacy of violence? But I’ll do that in another sermon.

<sup>iii</sup> Sam Portaro , Brightest and Best (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), pp. 64-65.

<sup>iv</sup> If we take modern evangelistic approaches as the model we then usually go about evangelism backwards, treating evangelism as something done to strangers, as something that initiates relationship—when the opposite is more often the case. If Jesus had used our approach, he would have gathered up strangers and worked to persuade them; but on no occasion does that seem to have been his practice.

<sup>v</sup> Portaro, Brightest and Best, *Ibid*.

<sup>vi</sup> He isn’t like the tourist in a foreign land who thinks that if he just speaks slowly, loudly and repetitively in his own language that somehow the natives will understand, even though they don’t understand or speak his language.

<sup>vii</sup> As Bill Tully points out, Paul is also saying, “There is one God. That God created us all. This is not your god or our god, but the God of all people. Not a god distant from us, not a god that we can control, and certainly not a god that we can reduce to a statue. There is the divine element present in the world in which we all live.” - Tully, *Ibid*.

<sup>viii</sup> Sam Portaro, Daysprings (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001), p. 209. Also, as Robert Pirsig put it, “You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it is going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it’s always because these dogmas or goals are [really] in doubt.” - from Robert M. Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York: Bantam, 1975), Chapter 13.

<sup>ix</sup> Namely, the God “in whom we live and move and have our being;”

<sup>x</sup> Sure, it’s true about Jesus, that, as St. Paul put it, “*in him* all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” (Colossians 1:19), and also it is also true that the God who took on humanity in the incarnation of Jesus born in Bethlehem did not discard that humanity when Jesus died, or when he was resurrected and ascended. But it is also true, as St. Paul also asserted, that, in the end, not even Christ will be the One to complete all things; rather it will be God who is “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23). And it is also true about God, as St. Paul put it, that “In him we live and move and have our being,” (Acts 17:28)—God who is the source of every breath we take and every beat of the heart, all of which lie *outside of* Jesus. Yes, our Christian Faith gives centrality to Christ, but we are not “Christomonists”—in other words, we do not reduce all Theology to Christology. As Karl Barth put it, “God is free to be wholly inward to the creature and at the same time as himself wholly outward, *totus intra et totus extra*...This is how he meets us in Jesus Christ” (Karl Barth Church Dogmatics Vol 2.1: The Doctrine of God (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 315). God is totally inside, and totally outside, of Christ. And so, Christ is the Way and the Truth

---

and the Life, and no one comes to the Father/Abba except through him (John 14:6)—but it is also true that God acts, in God’s freedom, in and through all sorts of ways that create and sustain our lives and universe.

<sup>xi</sup> Portaro, Daysprings, Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> I’ll conclude with Bill Tully:

“Inside each of us is a little Athens, a mixture of learning and nonsense, a collection of temples with idols we worship. No one is non-religious under this definition. But inside each of us is also that Spirit of truth. Paul’s...trip to Athens, after all these years, can inspire several truths...[First, we] need to be [attentive] to the need to choose among the idols and reject the nonsense...[Secondly] remember that we search best when we search with others, others with whom we can compare notes, others to help us along the way. [The search for] truth and meaning lead...to community. [And finally] most of all, in the search we are to be generous. Even Paul, a convert full of the fire of faith, could say to the Athenians what we can say for our time, too: that the God who is unknown to some is the God who is the creator and lover of all. The God ‘in whom we live and move and have our being.’” - Tully, Ibid.