

May 18 - Sermon at Athens

Acts 17:16-31

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Idols are things we create. Yes, it's true that in some measure we all create God in our own image, make God out to be who we want God to be. That just seems to be unavoidable. But still, there's a huge difference between an idol that we create and a God in whom we believe. At least there's a huge difference if our image of God is based on the stories of the Bible, the revelation of who God is in the person of Jesus, and on the reflections of other people of faith who wrestle with their relationship with God and with who God is.

So you can understand why Paul is so upset that when he reaches Athens he finds the city full of idols. You probably know that the Greeks and Romans had lots of gods. As best I can tell, most of them served to explain why things were the way they were and to serve as excuse for bad behavior. As in, "The gods made me do it." Mostly these gods aren't very likeable, and the stories told about them are like a soap opera, complete with dysfunctional families.

So, the Athenians had a long list of gods. In Athens, they even had a statue dedicated to the unknown god. Why would anyone do such a thing? I can only imagine that they were unsatisfied with the idols they had. They must have figured that there must be something more, that something was missing.

The Greeks Paul meets in the Areopagus are a diverse and curious people. They are renowned for their love of learning and their seeking of wisdom. They want to hear what Paul has to say. Maybe this Jew will scratch their itch for something more.

Paul does his best to speak to them on their own terms. He praises their religiosity, their hunger for something more. He says that he is here to speak to that hunger by proclaiming the Creator of all, the Lord of heaven and earth, the one God who is. The God Paul has in mind does not behave badly. This God comes down in the person of Jesus to reveal and to redeem. This God in Jesus is willing to go to the cross in order to reveal the resurrection, reveal the breadth and the depth of God's love, and to draw all people to that love.

Paul does his best to speak about these things in words in their language, using the concepts that the people there could relate to. But he's preaching to a tough crowd. And he says two things that the Athenians have a hard time hearing. One is that he proclaims the resurrection. And to Greeks who believed that material things were corrupt and that only spiritual things or things of the mind were pure, this doesn't compute. Greeks believed in an immortal soul, not the resurrection of the body.

And the other thing Paul does that turns off some of his hearers is he calls for repentance. Now that's getting personal. It's taking everything Paul has to say about God and what God was up to in Jesus out of the realm of thought and debate and theory and making it *very* personal. What the Athenians didn't get and what we sometimes forget is that our faith is not about ideas or propositions or a philosophy of life as the Greeks thought. Our faith, like all belief systems, does

have those elements. But at its heart our faith is about a relationship with the lord of heaven and earth. It's about knowing this God, learning to love this God, learning to love those whom God loves (which by the way is everyone). Our faith is about being drawn into God's love, and then living out God's love in our thoughts and speech and actions. When we do that we are naturally led to repentance and a changed life. And when we do that, our relationship with God affects every aspect of our lives. Our faith, our relationship with God is *very, very* personal. Not in the sense that it's private. It's not private; it's lived out in the world. Our faith is personal in the sense that it directly affects our person

That is the something more for which the Athenians were searching. To cover their bases, they erected a statue to the unknown god. But the God and Father of Jesus is neither unknown nor unknowable. This God is known through the actions and the teaching of the man Jesus. This God is known through the doing of mercy and justice and kindness. And yes, this God is known through the study of Scripture, seeking understanding, and developing and then living out a philosophy of life based on God's values.

Do you know this God? You can. This God is not far away. In him you live and move and have your being. You are a child of this God. Be drawn into his love. Live out his love. Know this God.