

Acts 17:22-31

Relinquishing our Idols: Preaching in the Age of COVID-19

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Sixth Sunday after Easter

Come Holy Spirit and fill us with your truth, in your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

Here's the apostle Paul, laying the flagstones for our faith. You remember Paul, the incredibly well educated devout Jew who was convinced that the followers of Christ should be shut down and stopped at all costs; Paul who held the coats of the angry crowd who stoned Stephen, the first deacon, to death, because he was accused of committing blasphemy. *

Here's Paul, the former persecutor of the followers of Jesus, after having had his road to Damascus conversion experience, where Jesus spoke to him, temporarily blinded him with the light, that same man is now on fire for Jesus.

He was not a follower before the cross. He had nothing to do with the disciples prior to Jesus' resurrection. But now, He is a man, whose entire life has been flipped and twisted. Before he was happy to see Christians die, now he wants the whole world to see and know how Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified, died and has risen and that He is the Messiah, the one who gives life to the world.

This is what Paul is saying to all of the cities, towns and villages he visits. Some of those visits have gone well some have gone poorly and, just before coming to Athens he was on a bit of hard patch: spirited out of Thessalonica by night, and then chased to the coast right out of the town of Beroea. It is here that our story begins for today.

Paul is wandering through Athens, which is a great seat of learning, a center of philosophical conversations and theological inquiries. It was kind of university town, if you will. I'm not sure if the predominate colors were green and white or blue and maize, but suffice to say it was a place where intellectual curiosity ruled the public square.

As he traverses the city, Paul is taken aback, he is put off by the preponderance of idols. The polytheism of the Greeks was not at all to Paul's liking. He spoke out against these many gods, and some who heard him speak were struck by his words, inspired by his rhetoric and they invited him to come and speak at the Areopagus.

The Areopagus, was the early aristocratic council of ancient Athens, named for site, a hill, an ancient revered outdoor venue where the Athenians had held weighty debates for centuries. So here is Paul, speaking to an august crowd. Though he is not at all excited by the various and sundry gods the people seem so taken with and worship in Athens, he does not directly address that issue. Instead showing his brilliance, his

evangelical aptitude he marvels at their overt religiosity. He compliments them on their many altars to various gods littered through the city. He says, “Why you all are so religious that you even have an altar erected to an “Unknown God,” the ultimate hedging of bets! And then he pivots from there.

That God that you do not know, the God whom you call the “Unknown God” that God whom you created an altar for, is one whom I proclaim. That God is the one who made heaven and earth. This God, our God, does not live in shrines made by human hands, for this God has made all things that be, and that God is not far from us, for, “In him we live and move and have our being.” He is with us here, He is with us now, so says Paul to the people of Athens, centuries ago.

That my friends is what brings me to us, to you, to me, to all of us in the time of COVID-19. For I too feel like we are at the Areopagus, we like the Athenians are on the verge of understanding something new, or maybe seeing something old in a whole new way. The virus has laid clear to us, the inadequacy of the idols in which we may have previously invested ourselves. No longer can we worship the idol of believing that we are in control. No longer can we proclaim that America is safe from the ailments that befall other countries. No longer can we say that if we buy enough things, we can ensure our safety. Nor can we say that churches live and die by the strength and beauty of our buildings. Nor can we continue to intone the phrase “all are created equal in this land.” Every one of these idols have been cracked at their base by the ferocity of this virus. What then my friends might your idols be?

Now, like the Athenians, we are being challenged by God, called by Paul, to truly embrace the teachings of Jesus, to stop looking for the living among the dead, to stop breathing air into lifeless gods. Now we are being invited to embody what Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed. We are being asked as individuals and as communities, to love one another as Jesus loves us. We are being asked to set aside some of our wants, some of our desires and needs so that others may live. Give our money so that all of us may have food, temporarily refrain from our in-person liturgies so that others will not be put at risk of catching this disease. Hold fast to the hope of what is to come without rushing back to re-create what we had before.

In this new world, in this new now we are being asked by God to make sure our sisters and brothers have enough to eat, that all have access to the medical care we may need, that we may all choose to live for one another and not only for ourselves. We have the option now to relinquish our idols of before and embrace in body and soul the simple teachings of Jesus Christ: feed the hungry, tend the sick, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, and shield the joyous, all for love’s sake.

In your holy name we pray.

** In the first edition of this sermon I mistakenly said that Stephen was stoned for feeding people. This was wrong. I conflated Stephen’s ministry which included feeding people with the*

reason why members of the council became upset, which primarily rested on Stephen's testimony before the high priest regarding Jesus Christ. My error, although unintentional, could lead a listener or a reader to believing that Stephen was stoned for feeding people. This incorrect assertion could bring about or legitimate anti-Semitic thoughts or actions. This was not my intent. And I am very sorry that my error may have led someone down an erroneous course of thinking. Anti-Semitism, in Christian thinking and preaching has been the foundation for countless atrocities in our world. And faithful Christians can never look the other way when it occurs. My deepest apologies for my inaccuracies in my sermon that unintentionally travelled that well-worn path.