

Sunday October 31st, 2021

Acts 17:16-34

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Athens"

As you may be aware, in the United States there is a federal law banning any form of public prayer in public schools. This prohibition led one school to post the following notice in one of its restrooms: "NOTICE! In the event of an atomic attack, the federal ruling against prayer in this school will be temporarily suspended." (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p.275) The secularization of our society has led to an increase interest and promotion of atheism.

Popular writers like Richard Dawkins are gaining a lot of press for urging people to abandon any idea of God, and adopt pure science as their belief system. Well, writers like Dawkins have been around a long time, and you kind of expect a sensational book or two every once in a while, but what I saw in The Toronto Star on Monday March 16 of this year, caught even me by surprise. The title of the article reads, "Atheist minister praises glory of Good." Not God, the good.

The article goes on to say that Gretta Vosper, an avowed atheist, has been the leader of the West Hill United church since 1997. The article goes on to state that the services in West Hill include no reference to the scriptures, and no mention of any deity. The hymnbook has been jettisoned, as her husband the pianist, has even composed most of their music to be atheistic. Vosper denies that Jesus ever lived. I quote the article: "These provocations-which Vosper invariably delivers with smiling good cheer-have rankled many in the United Church of Canada, famed for its liberality." Rankled the United church?

Her preaching is described as "a brand of soothing, non-religious morality, faintly spiritual, but mostly concentrated on leading a good life and being kind to others." They even describe their church as a "warm place to find yourself." I do not know Gretta Vosper, nor have I ever attended a service at West Hill, but the post-modern philosophy drips from the description in the newspaper. My immediate reaction to the article was simply this, "Why bother? If my goal in life is self-enhancement and feeling good, I don't need to go and hear sermons about it."

Why go to church at all? If God is not real, personally I'd rather spend my time fishing. I mentioned this article today, because I realized as I was reading it that Gretta Vosper, would actually have faced more hostility in Athens than Paul ever did. As ridiculous as some Greek philosophies were, they rarely, if ever, denied the existence of a deity. Actually, most often they believed in several deities. The Athenian council that met Paul, would have been dumbfounded by an atheist.

Being an atheist would have been considered illogical. The question was never whether or not there was a God or gods, but rather which ones were the true deities. Further, they would debate as to the nature of the gods' relationships with people. If they called Paul a babbler, I am not sure what they would have called an atheist. Now, it is not clear whether Paul ever intended to even go to Athens on his missionary journey.

However, events in Thessalonica and Berea forced his hand. Hunted by Jewish opponents, Paul found it necessary to flee to Athens, and await Silas and Timothy who remained in Berea to finish the work there.

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Luke tells us that Paul was very disturbed by all the idols he saw in Athens. The idols presence is not really surprising, considering Athens was the cultural, and religious center of the Greek people, but Paul had never been there, so the display was unsettling. We read that Paul undertook his usual strategy, and went to the synagogue and first preached there, but he also took opportunities to speak in the public square. This sort of preaching activity was not foreign to the Athenians, and in fact their culture welcomed it, and cultivated it.

We learn further that Paul eventually runs into two prominent groups of philosophers, and begins to engage them in debates. At the time Paul walks into Athens, these two schools of philosophy were the most popular among the Greeks, and these two groups were continually debating each other, as their ideas conflicted with each other. The first group were called Stoics and they followed Zeno's teaching of Stoicism.

We might be familiar with this word "Stoic" because we still use it in English today. Briefly, Stoics believed that emotions were dangerous things. Left unchecked, emotions lead to illogical, destructive thinking. Stoics believed that moral and Intellectual perfection could only be achieved by the suppression of these emotions and the judgments that lead to them. Today we say a stoic person is someone who is unemotional, or a Vulcan in the Star Trek universe.

The other group were called Epicureans. Epicureans were actually an offshoot branch of philosophy we call hedonism. They believed that pleasure was the greatest good. They differed from hedonism in that their goal was not unrestrained pleasure, but rather an absence of pain. The highest level of pleasure was the absence of pain. These two groups disagreed on many things, but one thing they did agree on was that Paul was a babblers. Paul uttered nonsense.

This word translated as "babblers" is interesting. It literally means "seed speaker". It carried with it the idea of a bird pecking indiscriminately at scraps of ideas here and there, and then passing them off as profound, with no depth of understanding whatsoever. It is like a person who collects ideas, and trivia, and simple answers to complex questions, and thinks that they are wise; and even worse they believe they are qualified to dispense wisdom.

Someone like this is not just a "know-it-all", but an indiscriminate know it all. For those of you old enough to remember the old sitcom "Cheers", you might remember a character named Cliff Claven, a mailman, who on every episode, dispensed irrelevant trivia to try and make himself seem intelligent, and a valuable person to have around.

These two groups of philosophers in Athens couldn't make sense of what Paul was saying, so they "took him" to the Council of Philosophers. Luke isn't very clear here, but it looks like Paul wasn't actually forced to go, he wasn't dragged away in chains, but was simply invited to come and address the council. Remember, the pursuit of knowledge, especially philosophy, was one of the Athenians greatest values. New ideas needed exploration and careful consideration.

The council was held in or on the Aeropagus or literally Ayres Rock. This was the highest point in the city, and is essentially a big rock, which you can still visit today. In some translations this place is called "Mars Hill", and thus Paul's sermon here is sometimes called the "Mars Hill Sermon".

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Now, at this council, there would have been even more Stoics and Epicureans, but also other schools of thought. Essentially this council was made up of esteemed elders, renowned for their thinking, who spent their days settling disputes and discussing ideas. “Come and tell us more about this new religion. You are saying some startling things, and we want to know what it’s all about.” The tone here is clearly that of invitation. They want to hear what Paul has to say. This council valued truth, and they believed that you never knew when or from whom truth would come. What an opportunity!

Paul gets to speak to the most influential men of Athens, which could impact all of Greece and beyond. However, there is a problem. Unlike the Jews, and devout Gentiles, Paul usually addresses, these men know nothing of the Old Testament. Paul cannot quote scripture to them to prove his points as they have never heard it, not would it carry any weight with them. Paul needed a touchstone. He needed an idea, a concept, something that could bridge the gap between himself and his listeners.

God is good, and if we recall, we have seen the Holy Spirit had been preparing Paul for this moment. Remember at the very beginning of this passage, Luke mentioned that Paul had been disturbed by all the idols he saw. You see, Paul had never been to Athens, and so he behaves as we might, like a tourist; walking around, taking in the sights. Clearly from what Paul saw, the Athenians are not atheists, but how to reach them on a spiritual level.

Among the idols to Zeus, Athena, Hera, and so on, Paul noticed something interesting. In Athens there was an altar, a place to make sacrifices, with the inscription “to an unknown god”. Now I know what you are thinking, “Why on earth would the Athenians have such an altar?” Why worship someone who has no name, no area of control like Poseidon over the sea. You ever heard the term “hedging your bets”? Never leave a stone unturned.

The Athenians believed in so many gods, and kept hearing about new ones from travelers from other lands, that they feared they may have left one out of their collection of idols and temples. They feared that such an omission would offend this unknown god. So, to cover themselves, they sacrificed and worship an unknown. It may seem odd, but actually it makes perfect logical sense, and the Athenians were a logical people.

This “unknown god” is Paul’s touchstone. The Athenians already worship an unknown god, so why not make them aware of who this unknown God really is. It is a brilliant strategy, and the Athenians drink it all in. So, carefully Paul describes God in ways that the Athenians would understand. God is the creator, the judge, and the Saviour. God is in charge of everything, even the rise and fall of nations.

Everything is going so well. So far, everything Paul says, sounds reasonable to the council of Philosophers, and reason for them is a big deal. Then Paul says the one thing they cannot accept. The one thing they reject as utter nonsense. Verse 32 reads, “When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of a person who had been dead, some laughed, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.” If Paul had just refrained from mentioning the crucifixion and resurrection everything would have been great. Many Athenians may have come to faith if these matters were omitted.

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It was an “inconvenient truth”. Now there are a couple of things to say about this story, but it is striking isn’t it that Paul receives a hearing of his beliefs, and there, surprise, surprise, is no riot. The council members may not have believed Paul’s words, but they respected his right to be heard. Some in the council may have mocked him, but they heard him out, and Paul left in one piece, with some folks coming to faith.

What I do want to point out to you is the same thing I mentioned last week, and that is that the core of Paul’s message, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus, provokes a response. The Athenians did not mind Paul’s message, until he mentioned Jesus’ death and resurrection. In other words, Paul had them until the cross and empty tomb. I need to emphasize that Paul was unapologetic in talking about Jesus’ death and resurrection.

“We preach Christ crucified” was his motto. The Gospel was not complete without these elements. This heart of the message of the Gospel is meant to offend. It offends because it forces us to confront our sin and our need for grace. It offends the Greeks and the Jews, and many people today, because it does not allow for our own efforts to save us. Just as in Athens when Paul preached there, people still laugh at this core message. “It’s a big turn off” some might say; so why not jettison it like Gretta Vosper of West Hill United church.

I don’t know how tempted Paul was, if at all, to water down his message. To take out the offending bits like the cross and resurrection to make it more palatable to the Greeks. But there are plenty of churches and believers today who have no trouble doing that. In the effort to reach more people, to fill the pews, some churches have taken to altering the message of the gospel to make it easier to swallow.

I mean who wants to hear that we have to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus to Calvary. That’s not a very popular thing to hear, especially in a society given over to self-satisfaction through material things and pleasure. It is not a popular thing to hear when you are trying to live a fully logical existence. Gee, we still have Stoics and Epicureans among us. In trying to be relevant to the culture, like Gretta Vosper, we water down the message, making it meaningless, and worse making it insufficient for leading people to salvation.

Today’s buzz word is “seeker sensitive churches”. The essential meaning behind this is that you give people what they want in worship, and not what they need. John MacArthur in his book, *Hard to Believe* writes,

“Now comes the issue that’s behind all the pop music and self-congratulation and ‘fun’ that the seeker sensitive church promise: People aren’t going to buy Christianity if it’s hard. If it doesn’t meet their needs, they won’t be interested. If they want six fruit flavors and you’ve only got two, you’ve lost them. They need Christianity that tastes great, and if it’s less filling in the short run, well, we’ll explain all the hard stuff later. There is a name for that in the marketing world, and it’s called bait and switch.”

Yes, there is some real value in taking great care with our delivery of the message, but in the end, it’s the content that actually matters. Paul was not likely a great orator, at least compared to some of the Athenians who prized debate.

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In fact, we have a story in Acts 20 where Paul preached so long, a man trying to keep cool and took to sitting in an open window, dozed off fell out of that window and died. My point is that the power of the gospel lies in its content given by the Holy Spirit, not in its delivery. And yes, at the heart of that content is the fact that we are all sinners and Christ died to save us.

That is why what I read in the Toronto Star last week, upsets me. The preacher/leader of West Hill United thinks it is enough to celebrate the “good”. That somehow, by some human effort we can solve all of the world ills by simply embracing good ethics. Rubbish. I know that I am not good on my own.

I know that I could come to church with you good folks every day of my life, and I would never be good. I know that my efforts to achieve any semblance of good will ultimately fail, and I will hurt others as I fumble in the dark. Pursuing the “good” achieves nothing, except frustration and heartache. If we want some peace, some hope that life can be better, then we need to be saved from ourselves. We need the goodness of someone else to be infused into us.

In a nut shell, we need God in Christ.