

Sermon 052117

Religious in Every Way

St. Luke wrote two books about Jesus. The first book we call the Gospel according to Luke, and book is about what Jesus did and taught in the world. The second book is called the Acts of the Apostles, and it is about what Jesus continued to do in the world after he had ascended into heaven. The Book of Acts is about Jesus building his church. Here is what Jesus told his disciples shortly before he ascended into heaven. From Luke's Gospel, Chapter 24: *Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."*

The disciples did what they were told, and in the first chapter of Acts we hear how they waited in Jerusalem. In our Gospel reading this morning we get a hint of that power coming from on high, and in two weeks we will celebrate Pentecost, the great day when the disciples were clothed with that power as they waited in Jerusalem. With the power of the other Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, the disciples began the task of proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel in the Name of Jesus beginning

from Jerusalem and then to all nations. This was the beginning of Christ building his church.

The Book of Acts tells the story of evangelism, of how Peter went from being a bumbling ex-fisherman to brilliant evangelist. We see the power of the Spirit in Peter's sermon at Pentecost. *And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."* Later, a spectacular vision from God confirmed to Peter that God's Kingdom is open to everyone including Gentiles, but his evangelistic mission was to the Jews.

It was Paul who was called to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. In the Book of Acts Paul is seen first as a rabid anti-Christian, zealously pursuing the followers of Jesus and even approving of the execution of the great evangelist, Stephen. Here is how Paul described his background: *"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.* Paul's life was forever changed

when Jesus came to him in a vision as he was traveling on the road to Damascus. It was at this time that Jesus commissioned Paul to evangelize the Gentiles.

Paul spent several years preparing himself for his mission. He then embarked on three and possibly four missionary journeys. The trips were not easy. Paul said in Second Corinthians: *Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.* The only way to explain how Paul was able to complete these long and incredibly difficult missionary journeys is in the promise of Jesus found in our Gospel reading. *"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.* Through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus was building his church.

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, Paul has been run out of Berea and separated from his companions Silas and Timothy. He is in Athens waiting for them. Even though Athens had been devastated in the wars with Rome, in the 1st century it was still considered a center of literature, philosophy and the

arts. As Paul waited for his friends to arrive so that they could continue their missionary journey, he was deeply disturbed by the presence of all of the idols in the city. He found the Athens Jewish community and preached in the synagogue as he often did when he visited a city. Then he encountered some of the resident intellectuals. *Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.*

Paul was now facing a huge challenge, but not a challenge like the ones he described in Second Corinthians. This was an intellectual and spiritual challenge. To give this a contemporary perspective, it would be like me being invited to present the Good News of the Gospel at the University of Texas. Jesus told his disciples that they would face challenges like this, and this is how they would handle it. *And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.* As Paul begins to address the Athenian geniuses perhaps he

remembered that Jesus promised this: *The Spirit of Truth... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

Paul's speech to the Areopagus should a model for preaching to unbelievers.

Actually, it is an example of how to talk with people with whom we disagree.

This might be a good time for the folks in Washington, D.C. to take a look at Acts

17:22-31. Paul begins his talk respectfully: *Athenians, I see how extremely*

religious you are in every way. Even though Paul probably didn't mean this as a

compliment, his audience probably took it that way. He then proceeded to

interact with their own thought even quoting some of their own writers. Peter

viewed things the same way: *do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify*

Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands

from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and

reverence. I have seen some examples of this.

Peter Moore was Dean and President of the Trinity Seminary. Even though the

seminary is in Ambridge, Pa., Peter and his family lived in Sewickley, Pa., a

wealthy Pittsburgh suburb. Peter's son, David, attended Sewickley Academy, a

private school with a large number of Jewish students. Since he is a priest, Peter

was asked to offer the benediction at David's eighth grade graduation. Peter

was in a quandary because he wanted to be faithful to the Gospel, but he also

didn't want to offend the Jewish students and especially their parents. Peter

found some ancient Celtic prayers and used those prayers as the benediction.

The audience loved the prayers even though they were in the name of Jesus,

and the Jews present were not offended. Anything ancient and Celtic is apparently acceptable, even if the prayers are Christian. Brilliant!

The other example of evangelizing a potentially hostile crowd took place last weekend at a university, not the University of Texas by the way. At my grandson, Manning's graduation at the University of Mississippi, the business school class president gave a talk. This young man was laid back, and began his speech by talking about how glad everyone was to be graduating. He spoke of some of the experiences he had during his time at Ole Miss, and complimented the faculty members. I thought that he related very well to his classmates, much better than the other speakers. Then he said that every graduation speech contains advice to the graduates for the future. He said, "Our future is in Jesus Christ. He died for our sins, and came to save us." He expanded on that message as he concluded his speech. I thought that it was very effective. This is exactly what Paul did at the Areopagus.

Paul spoke of the error of idolatry in a respectful, well-informed way. He used the inscription that he found on one of their altars that read "to an unknown god" to introduce them to: *The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth...* After introducing the philosophers to the One True God, he began a call for radical personal change. *While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given*

assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” The call to repentance is urgent because there will be a day of judgment. The proof or assurance of this is the Resurrection.

What was the result of Paul’s sermon? Predictable. *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.* If Paul was discouraged, it certainly didn’t slow him down. He left Athens and went to Corinth where he preached in the synagogue every Sabbath, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah.

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul indicated that his motto for living in accordance with the Gospel was this: One God, one Lord, one goal...*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* That was the thrust of his speech at the Areopagus, and it is a good motto for us. We live in a society much like the one Paul encountered in 1st century Athens with all manner of religions and morality. Paul told the Athenians something that is still true. *From one ancestor he [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.* We are surrounded by people seeking God, even if they sometimes don’t know it. Many say that they have found the way to God. In our tolerant society it is common to say that as

long as they are sincere, that is fine. We certainly need to remember the need for respect, but the truth is that there is only one way and you heard it last week. From John 14: *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.* One God, One Lord, One goal...press on toward the goal for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.