

One God, One Church

A sermon for Celebration Sunday, May 21, 2017

Delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno based on Acts 17:22-31

In today's scripture Paul has been travelling all over the Mediterranean, preaching. He's been pretty successful but can the good news of Jesus get a hearing in a university town? I mean, among sophisticated people? Thinking people? Will it play in a town with the highest percentage of PhDs in Utah. I mean, Greece?

Here in this morning's text, Luke writes of Paul's trip to Athens, home of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

This is the home of Classical civilization. But look, Luke tells us that Paul is unimpressed. He sees the Parthenon, and the original Apollo Belvedere. He views what we call today the Elgin Marbles and all he sees, says Luke, is a city full of idols. He is a good Jew. So, what may appeal to us, to him looks instead like a peculiar kind of wasteland. It's Las Vegas and it's also Temple Square.

So Paul does an interesting thing. He does what he does wherever he goes. He asks for a hearing and takes full advantage of every pulpit he can find, indoors or out. He argues in the synagogue, then the street, and then in the marketplace.

Some hear Paul and think of him the way some of us think of hellfire preachers at a Saturday Farmer's market, shouting their heads off. Turning more people off to the faith than on to it. But Paul is brighter than most, and better schooled than most, as well.

Still, I am sure he was dismissed by some as a barbarian. The more liberal of the day, at least, listen to what he says about religion. It's a lively topic and the more open minded like to hear something new about the gods.

So they invite him to the Areopagus. That's where they have the best philosophical debates. In the open air. He is said to have a new teaching; what might it be?

Paul stands up and offers something different from what he offered in the synagogue. This is not a sermon, It is, instead, a well crafted Classical oration.

He offers an Aristotelian oration. Characteristically, he begins by flattering the ears of his hearers.

"Athenians, I see how in every way you are extremely religious. It seems you have never met a god you wouldn't honor.

"You people in University towns," he is saying, "you are either extreme skeptics or, you believe anything at all. If I said, 'Plato was an alien from Mars,'" some of you would believe me."

Twenty-two years ago I became a pastor in a University town in Oregon where many people tended to believe pretty much anything. Every other person there seemed to either be a guru or a realtor. Sometimes they were both.

In a calculated move, I brought the great scholar of the world's religions, Huston Smith, to that town. In front of a crowd of 500, I said that our little town was full of spiritual seekers. I asked him, "What parameters do you use – what rubrics can we trust, when searching for a religion to inform our lives?"

"Trust the enduring traditions," was his answer. The ones that have been around for at least 1500 years. They have deep spiritual wells. It doesn't mean they are perfect – all religions are instituted by humans and therefore they all include attributes that are wrong-headed, but the ancient ones also have had time to develop veins of deep wisdom.

And the veins of wisdom that go down the deepest all entertain something. They entertain mystery – those veins are at home with it, and they make the searcher feel he or she is very small but in a kind of healthy way, and they teach that whatever intelligence created this universe is very large and very great when it comes to purpose and beauty.

But, you know, somehow, in the last two hundred years, we in the west have lost our taste for mystery. We have become suspicious of wonder. In the universities, we hear that educated people are too smart for it. Religion of any stripe is easily dismissed; made fun of.

The Rev. Wil Willimon, who is connected with Duke university says, "In this university we live in an environment that . . . is little more than extended training in cynicism, that is, training that all intellectual positions are more or less commentaries on a person's social location, and therefore, all intellectual positions are more or less equal, or pointless. You have your opinion and I have mine and that's cool. The educated person is the one who is able to understand any position offered without having to change in order to understand that position. All intellectual positions are therefore, "Interesting."

Interesting, but not worth pursuing or even examining very carefully.

This is not a new phenomenon. In the 19th and 20th centuries skepticism became a major religion. There was a spirit of demystification everywhere. People lost the taste for wonder; especially in Europe.

Aldous Huxley the great English writer and scientist once said, "There was a time when I gazed upon the stars with great wonder and amazement. Now, late in life, I look up at the heavens in the same way in which I gaze upon the faded wallpaper in a railway station waiting room."

Some thought that it was inevitable that every one would eventually become athiestic. But we live in a new era: the Hubble telescope has opened our eyes, as have philosophers of science who think bigger thoughts than Aldous Huxley was able to. Something has shifted quite recently. Science and religion are no longer thought to be enemies. A change is in the wind.

Thomas Kuhn has said that truly great advances in knowledge tend to be preceded by certain mythological shifts; paradigm shifts. And these shifts have been around a long time. They come around like the occasional ice age. Or thaw after one.

Paul, in his day, presented the Athenians a new vision, a shift in thinking -- He told them that he had found the one who may be the goal of their searching. He tries to relate to them along the lines of what we would call, Natural Theology.

He reminds them of the order and beauty apparent in the universe, the fact that every year the seasons wind their way around to spring endlessly. And that in those very things is evidence that there exists "one in whom we live and move and have our being."

He speaks not of a god "up above," but of a god who is in everything and who we live in and through ourtselves.

Ask a fish what water is, they may not be able to tell you (and not just because they cannot speak). Water is in everything they experience and it is the most plentiful thing they are made of. It's similar with God and human beings.

The Athenians made a lot to do of their buildings and their statues and the inscriptions on all of them, and when they spoke of the gods mostly what they did was point to these human-made things. Paul was attempting to make them look hugher, and deeper.

(On the screen in a photo of the church)

Here is a picture of our church – with a couple of important symbols anchored right in the architecture. The steeple, which says we are a church, and a cross that differentiates us from the majority religion in this state.

I'm imagining Paul walking around this church campus and what he might have to say to us and what it might sound like if it were written by Luke, the author of Acts:

Then Paul stood at the corner of 17th and 17th in a Sugarhouse neighborhood of Salt Lake City, and said, "Wasatch Presbyterians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I have walked around your church grounds and interior spaces and looked carefully at the objects of your worship I found among them several things that interested me.

He would have seen the steeple, surely, and the crosses that adorn the steeples and other parts of our outside.

Looking around in this room he would have noticed the many windows, the pulpit, the table, and the baptismal font.

But I think what might have interested him the most would be this assembly of people meeting all together as one on this celebration day.

He would note that at the center of this celebration is not a baptism, or communion, but just all of us celebrating what it means to be together – all of us different in age and livelihood, and giftedness, and education, and all the richer for our differences which we set aside every time we come in this room to explore together again what makes us one: “the God in whom we, all of us, live and move and have our being.”

Amen