



Good to be back after taking a few weeks off. So thankful for Gwen, Jannie and Tyler as they filled the pulpit the last few weeks...for Paul and Tim and others who stepped up in other worship leadership capacities. Makes me so grateful for this church and its leaders.....

Today's passage is one of my favorite in all of Scripture. Paul makes a brilliant presentation of the gospel, doing it in a way that connects with his audience right where they are. Too often, in a world where people are further and further away from the gospel message...where there's less familiarity with it, and less connection points...the Church's presentation of the gospel is done in a completely irrelevant way, and people see Jesus and the Church as being irrelevant, boring, out of touch, useless, and so forth.

In fact, it's tempting to read this passage and say, "Wow, statues that represent gods and values and beliefs...and people are actually attached to those statues? That seems so antiquated." And yet we are in the midst of a national conversation about the role of statues in the public that represent and even commemorate or celebrate people and ideals that are at odds with what we say as a nation we value. So even as architecture, art, technology, language and so much more has changed, the human condition hasn't changed that much and the gospel message continues to be relevant.

Because of all that has changed, however, we would do well to understand that and adapt how we live as Jesus' witnesses. For those of us who follow Jesus, the types of questions for us to address are: **How can we present the relevant message of the gospel in a relevant way? How can we share that Jesus Christ is true and trustworthy?**

And Paul gives us some answers in today's passage. His missionary journeys led him to Athens. Athens represented "the highest level of culture ever attained in classical antiquity."ⁱ The city was a leader in the world of art, philosophy, rhetoric and public speaking, and had been for several centuries.ⁱⁱ People such as Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, among others, called Athens

home in the centuries leading up to Paul's visit.

Many of the architectural structures and sculptures of the day are still visible and found around the city today. And visitors today to Athens view these masterpieces as great works of art and human achievement, and nothing more. But for Paul, as he walked through the streets of Athens, artistic appreciation for these objects would have been a foreign concept to him, because they represented, or were dedicated to, their gods and goddesses.ⁱⁱⁱ In the first verse of today's passage, we're told that he is “greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (17:16). **For Paul, walking the streets of Athens surrounded by temples and sculptures of gods and goddesses would not have been a study in art and architecture, but a study in pagan religion.**

So Paul finds himself in this city with some time to kill as he's waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. And he begins discussing the idols that he sees, and what they represent, and he then takes that as an opportunity to share about the good news of Jesus Christ – his life, his death, and his resurrection. And it is out in the marketplace that some philosophers debated with him.

Because of his proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, some people accuse him of proclaiming false divinities. So, in verse 19 they take him to the Areopagus. The Areopagus is the name of both a place, and the group of people who formed the court that met at that place. They acted as gatekeepers of public speaking in Athens: if you wanted to give a lecture, you had to get their stamp of approval. We have no concept of this in our day in age. Nowadays, if you have something to say, you just put it out on Facebook, a blog, or other social media for all to see, read, and hear. It doesn't matter if you get your educational paperwork from Harvard or out of a crackerjack box – you can have a voice. That's not how it worked in Athens; you had to earn your right to be heard. Now, Paul is not necessarily looking for that “seal of approval,” but he's brought before the Areopagus anyway. He's got a message that's strange to them, and they want to hear more.

And what Paul says to them at first is the beginning of a lesson for us in relevant communication of the gospel message. He doesn't begin with

“salvation through Jesus Christ.” He doesn't begin with Genesis 1. He doesn't even begin by condemning their idol worship, which is what so greatly troubled him about their culture. **In fact, he begins by paying them a compliment about their religiosity.** They're completely immersed in spiritual stuff that's quite far from Jesus. And yet Paul tolerates their false religions, and even *uses their religious culture* as a way to present the message of the cross and the empty tomb. The very thing that irked him the most about their culture is what he compliments them about. “I see how extremely religious you are in every way,” he says. Paul knows his Scriptures forwards and backwards, he knows the message of Jesus Christ, He's helped start churches, he's baptized people...He knows this new Christian Faith and its Jewish roots like the back of his hand. **But he shows us here how important it is to know the culture (i.e., people, cultural values, etc.) as well, or else he'll present the gospel in irrelevant ways.** If this were a group of Jews he was speaking to he'd point out how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah – that's what Philip did when he met with the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40, July 9) and that's what we see in most of Paul's preaching in the book of Acts, because he's usually in a Jewish context. But his audience here is much different, so he uses different connection points.

But he goes beyond studying and understanding their culture. He uses their culture to make his point. Look, if Paul had simply come out and said, “How can you believe this stuff? What have these ‘gods’ ever done for you? How have they made themselves known to you?” If he'd started with that judgmental and doubting response, that's probably the response he'd elicit from them – judgmental and doubting of his message – because people dig in their heels when criticized. Have you ever done that? Instead, Paul finds what he can affirm about them; he builds bridges, he gains their favor. Then, he points out that he's seen an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” He then proclaims to them that what they worship as unknown, is in fact knowable. Then he gets into who God is. But even here, he doesn't quote Scripture, give references to Genesis or Psalms, and so forth – because that would be unfamiliar to this audience. Have you ever tried quoting the Bible to someone who doesn't believe the Bible has any authority? It doesn't usually go well. Paul doesn't here, either. He talks about God in terms

familiar to them. He tells them that God has created everything that we see, including us human beings. That would resonate with them. And instead of talking about being made in God's image, he talks about being the “offspring of God.” That's very unusual language for the Bible, including Paul's teaching and writing. But he’s willing to adapt the language of his theology because it's going to resonate with the audience and their background of Greek mythology where they believed that their gods frequently had offspring through humans. So he’s using their terminology to point them to Jesus. He can do this because he knows what makes them tick; he knows their culture, their beliefs and their history. And he uses *their* language and *their* beliefs it to make his point.

In fact, he's studied their culture so well, that he even takes their poets' words and uses them for his own purposes. He gives new meaning to their own writings. He says: **“For 'in him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28).** Those two phrases in the sub-quotes both come from well-known poems of the day.^{iv} So not only does Paul know their culture: he even uses it for his purposes! I'd go so far as to say that he presents the gospel in a trendy, hip, fashion. I don't make any claim to being hip and trendy, but even I can listen to a secular CD, or read a novel, or the newspaper, or watch movies, or check out websites...and find things in them that I affirm as a Christian and use in a conversation with someone to share Jesus. Or...perhaps you’ve heard there’s a big event happening tomorrow? With the eclipse, that might be a great opportunity to throw out a question with some people as you observe it together that might start a conversation about the sun, the moon, the stars, creation...where it all comes from, etc. It might be a nice, light conversation for a summer day. ☺ But isn’t that the case with matters of faith: It’s not a light topic. Perhaps that’s why it’s difficult to talk about sometimes. But there are light, every day kinds of ways to get into the conversation, and the eclipse just might give you the opportunity tomorrow.

And the result of all of Paul's effort is that a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris, and several others, became believers in Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God grew...the gospel was received. So for those of us who are followers of Jesus, this is a great example and reminder about sharing the

good news of Jesus in ways that will connect with our audience. This is why we have a couple of RH Facebook pages, a website, it's why we updated the church logo a couple years ago...and it's why we collect school supplies and food for people in need. Those are ways to speak the language of the people...They are ways to share the message of the cross...or open a door to sharing the message of the cross, and to do so in ways that will connect with people in the 21st Century.

So that's one point to take away from this passage: to Know our audience, to understand the people around us, and be able to share the good news of Jesus in a way that will connect with them.

The second thing I want to highlight here is about this whole topic of idolatry. Before I went on vacation and study leave four weeks ago, "statues" such as the ones Paul sees here in Athens were not really on the radar screen of the public here in America. In fact, this whole sermon was going to be centered on the way in which Paul presented the gospel. Then, a week ago or so, the Charlottesville events happened, and as a result, people were zeroed in on the statues that commemorate the Confederate movement and other movements, and the values that those movements hold and that therefore these statues represent. Suddenly, the idea of Paul being "distressed" at all the statues in Athens (Acts 17:16) doesn't seem like such an antiquated thing.

And so I think it's worth asking ourselves as a nation and as individuals: **What are the idols in our lives, and what represents those idols?** Often when we hear the word "idol" we think of a thing – like the statues that Paul saw in Athens or that are in the headlines recently. But really, the idols in our lives are something deeper than that, and the statue is really more of a symbol, or an icon, of what the idol is. ("Idol" get used in a couple different ways, really.) That's not to say that symbols or icons are unimportant. In fact, as we've seen in the last week, they can elicit strong emotional responses from people. But I don't want us thinking that just because we take an item out of view and throw it in the garbage, that we now have no idols. You can take a confederate flag off the wall of your home or take a statue out of the public square, and we can still idolize the values that it represented.

So, with that distinction noted, it's worth asking this question about what are the idols in our lives and what represents them? And if you're wondering how to determine what the idols are in your life, I think a good test is this: **Idols are things or values in our life (that should be subservient to God) that when they are attacked or threatened, we have a negative/defensive response, and we try to hold on even tighter to them.** Tim Keller – the former pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City – says that an idol is “...whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, and I’ll feel significant and secure.’” And you see, when that security and significance is threatened, then we see what the idols are in our lives.

So idols aren't really about statues. And here, statues have suddenly become the center of the national conversation. **2,000 years after Paul, we haven't come a whole lot further, and we still struggle with idolatry.**

My wife's sister and her family live in Tampa Bay. Her husband spearheaded an effort at the city council level to raise money to move a confederate statue that stands in front of the Tampa Bay Courthouse. The city gave him and others who made the request 30 days to raise \$140,000, which was half the money needed to move it from the Tampa courthouse to a new location that was picked out - in a cemetery. Certainly, that's more appropriate, right? They raised \$180,000 in less than a day. And of course, there were objections – even from within his own extended family. Those objections come about because that statue – and more importantly, what it represents – gave people a sense of value, significance, and security. Their statue is attacked, and therefore the values it represents are also attacked, and the response is negative and defensive. Clearly, there is an idolatry revolving around skin color, power, social status, economic status, and more that is all intertwined.

It's easy then to judge others and say, “Those people have such terrible idols in their lives. I'm glad I don't!” ☺ But I think: **The better response is to instead ask ourselves, “What are my idols?”** What, if threatened, would you grasp onto more firmly, rather than releasing it and saying to the Lord, “Ok, Lord, now that's out of the way of my relationship with you, and I can trust you even more.” Because ultimately, as Christians, that's the problem

with idols: they come between God and us. That's what commandments number 2 and 3 are really about. "Have no other gods before me" and "no images or likeness of me or anything in heaven or on earth." No gods between us and our Heavenly Father, and nothing that represents anything else that we bow down to and worship. So I encourage you to consider: What are the idols in your life? **And when we identify them and realize what we're trying to derive from them (power, influence, security, acceptance, love, etc.) then God can come in and fulfill those needs in his own complete and perfect way.** Because the problem isn't desiring to be loved or to love someone...or to have influence or power or feel secure. Those aren't wrong. What's wrong is how we go about fulfilling the desire. That's when idolatry begins to creep in. But God can fill them all up. Even our unknown needs (just as they had an idol to an unknown god)...even those ones, God can meet and fill, and draw us into a deep relationship with him.

So my prayer is that this passage and the events of the last week will not cause us to just sit in judgment of others, but that we'll take the next step and allow God to work on our own hearts. The Bible tells us throughout that God searches our hearts, knows our thoughts, and our intentions. Will we allow the Spirit of God to convict us, so we would see ourselves as God does, and then turn to Him and let Him be what satisfies us – instead of the idols in our lives? So: What are the statues in our lives that need to be torn down? What are we idolizing in our own lives? How can we help our neighbor, our country, to turn away from the idols? How can we, like Paul, address those issues in ways that will bring people along and open eyes and hearts to what God is doing, and what God has done on the cross and the empty tomb? Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God alone can satisfy your deepest longings and desires – even those that remain un-named. Let him do that, rather than seeking to fill life up with idols...and then help others to do the same. Let's pray...Amen.

i Bruce, F.F. *New International Commentary on the New Testament – The Book of Acts*, p. 329.

ii Ibid.

iii Ibid.

iv Ibid., p. 338-339. The first quote of Paul's comes from a poem attributed to Epimenides the Creten, and the other comes from the *Phainomena*, by Aratus.