



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, May 21, 2017

The Sixth Sunday of Easter • Rogation Sunday

FR. CHARLES WITKE

Acts 17:22-31 | Psalm 66:7-18 | I Peter 3:13-22 | John 14:15-21

Athens is a long way from Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles finds himself in the intellectual capital of the ancient world, though it has dwindled into an overgrown college town. On his missionary travels as the first Christian witness and writer he has shown himself argumentative, sometimes prickly, or "challenging" as modern church writers characterize him. We see his more appealing side today as St Luke recounts his debut in the big time setting of Athens, and how he handles himself there has a lot to teach us today.

First of all, he shows courtesy and seriousness to those he attempts to reach with his new, and to them outlandish Middle Eastern ideas. Like all good missionaries, from the beginning of the Christian movement onwards, he adjusts his message to build up common ground with the Athenians where they are in their development, building on what objects of their worship he saw, and culminating in their altar to an unknown god. He shows appreciation for what this society holds dear, while displaying thoughtfulness and respect by agreeing that God abides in all of us somehow. Only then does he introduce the divine intervention of Jesus in the world. His message about God's embodied presence among us is hard for the Athenians to believe, just as it is often hard for us to grasp.

Sometimes God does not seem to walk with us through our messy lives, our disordered world, and we forget that he is yearning to be with all of us in such simple things in ordinary life as family, companionship, and for Christians not least in the table gathering with the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist.

Paul points out to the Athenians that they are indeed looking for God, but in the wrong places. Their objects of worship are images formed by humans. Are we also doing that? Most of us are not involved with objects of worship like gold or silver statues, but we are all too prone to have idols of our own: we set up goals such as material possessions, power, status, money, our appearance to others, our accomplishments, which can in the end leave no room for God or indeed for other people as they are, and they are often very different from us. In our drive for superiority over others unlike us, whether they are poorer, or from other social groups or countries or

racial or religious groups, we run the risk of leaving no room in our hearts for God who is also the God of those many others very different from ourselves. We do not want to be like the woman I once heard of: she was learning Hebrew in her old age so as to be able to converse later with her Maker in his own language.

Paul uses the Athenian inscriptions and statues he sees to establish connections to his audience and to lead them to a fuller idea of the divine.

We learn from his long years of missionary activity that his message is to find God within the relationships we build in our communities. It is to find God in others diverse from ourselves in our shared humanity in the person of Jesus.

For his audience of Greek philosophers in Athens, their goal was to find truth in their own intellects, rather like the besetting problem we see around us today in our world, where many seem to be seeking truth in their hand-held devices. Rather, God then and now is embodied forth in others: community, family, church, manifesting love and acceptance to the world.

Paul was not immediately successful in Athens, the big university town, but when he went on to Corinth where there were fewer self-professed intellectuals among the workers in commerce, industry and shipping and the like, his same message resonated: that message, his assurance of the embodied presence of a caring God among us, took root and flourished into one of the earliest Christian communities, and went on to the rest of the world. And as the saying is, the rest is history, and here we are this morning remembering Paul. Here God meets us where we are in our lives and in our relationships or understanding of ourselves and of others, and not perhaps where we should be in all this. And we hear how Paul related to those utterly different from him and from the path toward God that he was on. He recognized that every person is related to God before they are related to anything or anybody else.

In Paul's world there was great divisiveness between Jew and Greek, slave and free, rich and poor, and all the rest. In our world too there is great divisiveness as well. Paul and the

Jesus he preaches and the Church he helped establish offer a way forward: the way of inclusiveness of others differing from ourselves, openness to the needs of others, treating those different from ourselves with thoughtfulness and respect and courtesy and seriousness. And not least by remembering and by acting on the principle that God abides in all human beings. By doing this with God's help, Paul and his fellow workers eventually brought his world to Christ, and us here together today.

Amen.