

Sunday November 24, 2019
Lesson 13: The Worship Impulse
Scripture: Acts 17: 16, 22-34

Context:

The last lesson on knowing God is from the book of Acts in the New Testament. We travel with Paul to Athens, a cosmopolitan city known for its sophisticated and intellectual background. Yet the trip to the big city is hardly what Paul expects it to be.

When he arrives at this cultural center, Paul is not impressed. Paul sees the city as nothing more than an idol marketplace with the attempt to draw closer to every god of every imaginable backdrop. Eventually, Paul finds his way to the Areopagus, where Athenians spend their days doing what intellectuals love to do by relieving their boredom by searching for new ideas.¹ The Areopagus is where the different philosophers like Plato and Aristotle would gather with their pupils to debate and discuss the meaning of life.

By Paul traveling to the Areopagus, the writer of Acts, Luke, provides an opportunity to defend the Christian faith and also provide an appeal to the Gentiles. Christianity's cultured despisers will have to entertain Paul's classical rhetoric as he engages in a Socratic method to help them see his points.² He starts by flattering them for their religious devotion with all the idols and then moves in with the claim that the altar "to the unknown God" is actually the God who has no graven image. It is the God who lives and breathes and moves around and through us.

There are two major points Paul makes to prove his point and speak in the language of the cultured Athenians. The first is a focus on natural theology. Just as the pagan poets would focus on the beauty of the stars and the skies, Paul asks them to name the creator of such beauty. This natural theology, an observation of the natural world and its wonders as a forerunner of the faith is using logic and reason to explain Christianity.³ Paul presents the question: "How could such wonder be made and established?" with the declaration that it is the God of the universe who did such a thing.

Yet the second point is more nuanced. After describing the wonders of natural theology, Paul mentions resurrection. Resurrection is a fact completely contrary to the way the world works as all things in nature die, decay, and decline.⁴ Yet the resurrection of Jesus changes everything as Christians are assured one. Paul took a risk to bring something illogical and rock the very world of those at the Areopagus. Yet as he leaves, several become believers. Paul may not have convinced the whole Areopagus, but he did reach some of the most cultured and intellectual believers, a win for Christianity.

¹ William H. Willimon, "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 142.

² Ibid., 142.

³ Ibid., 143.

⁴ Ibid., 144.

Application

This passage has become a new favorite scripture of mine for several reasons. I think it started when I took an art history class in college and a professor presented Raphael's *The School of Athens* with all the differing philosophers from Greece represented in a classical Greek building. This is the scene I conjure up in my mind when I think of Paul coming amidst these established intellectuals and not hesitating to share how his faith has a logical and valid meaning for this world.

We may not live with Pericles or Plato as our next-door neighbors or go to buildings set aside for debate and discussion about philosophy. But we do live in a world where there are people who are extremely intelligent and who have different view points about the divine and the world. And there are all sorts of place where we meet and interact with them every day.

I think Paul's sermon to the intellectuals at the Areopagus very much gives us a blueprint for ways that we can talk about our faith today. We are not to shy away from people who have different viewpoints or ignore various trains of thought circulating around us. Instead we are to lean in and find different ways to share how knowing God fits in all sorts of places and trains of thought.

Perhaps one of the reasons that I love this scene and Paul's sermon is because it reminds us that our faith is both a head and heart endeavor. You can have both and need both. There are times when I have heard people scoff at those who are "intellectuals," who maybe ask questions that make us uncomfortable or maybe point out things that blow up the way we have always read a text. Or maybe they have an idea that is radical or is something that we've never heard before. Instead of diminishing these people, maybe we should listen to them and to see good in the nuggets of truth they present to us.

The church would do well to remember that Jesus himself was never "cut and dry." He always spoke in parables and would present a question with another question. Appreciate the intellectuals in your life; they may help you see things about God and yourself in a whole new light.

We also learn in this passage that learning to listen to intellectuals means that we should be willing to speak in new languages and be open to new ways the Spirit may lead us. How many times do we do things the same old way because "it's always been that way?" Here Paul tried something new by speaking to a different group of people in a different mode of communication. It pushed him and also pushed the early church to try and share the gospel in a way that may have been outside their comfort zone.

Finally, in this passage we learn that less is more. Note that the end of the story does not proclaim that the whole Areopagus converts after Paul's sermon. Some people stay rooted to their own philosophies and their own gods. There is no record of dozens of people from the Areopagus coming to the faith. Instead, there are a few mentioned by name. Here are a few intelligent intellectuals who realize they are missing something in their life.

We too should remember that quality is better than quantity. When we focus on how many people we can get to come to things, we miss out that less is more. Do we focus on numbers or do we focus on if we are equipping and engaging people to be disciples? Always remember that in scripture God does great things not necessarily with thousands of people at a time, but with small groups of individuals who are committed

and desire to grow in their walk with Christ.

Who are the Athenian intellectuals you know around you? What are ways that you engage with people who are not committed to God or the church? Where are the places you go to live in community with those who may believe or see things differently from you? What are new ministries you can consider? Do you focus on numbers or equipping when it comes to discipleship?

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh

Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge

PO Box 71

Brantley, AL 36009