

Sermon – June 9, 2024
“To an unknown god”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 17:22-32

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill open hearts, and anoint the sharing of Jesus' words and blessing for your people. May the words of our Lord ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and binds us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning. Our guiding verse for our journey through Acts remains Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”¹ Paul is on the move, sharing the Gospel, heading out beyond Samaria. As he travels from town to town, he is finding that the Gospel disrupts the status quo, and as a result, Paul's life is constantly in danger. But as he travels and shares the Gospel, there are some who hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and begin to follow Jesus. Paul has moved to new towns as riots break out and finally finds himself taken by his followers to Athens for his safety. The other members of Paul's mission team are working with the new churches that have started, and while Paul waits for them to join him, he has time alone in the beautiful Greek city of Athens. Luke describes

Athens as a place where the people did nothing but listen to new ideas all day long, sort of like TED Talks on steroids. Athens is a place where Paul's new religious ideas might find a friendly audience. Athens is ruled by Rome but is a free city in the Roman Empire, meaning the people there are able to self-govern. While Paul is waiting for his team to join him, he goes to work sharing Jesus in Athens. Paul has time to walk the streets and see all of the sites in Athens, a city filled with images of Greek, Roman, and other gods. All of those gods have idols, temples, and altars dedicated to their worship. The more Paul sees the large number of idols, the more distressed he becomes. In the first century, Athens was known for its idols, but their presence touches something deep within Paul. He realizes the people of Athens are missing the one true God as they instead worship all of the gods they have created. The more he sees the idols of Athens and witnesses their worship by the people, the greater his distress becomes.

Paul cannot use the Ten Commandments or other Old Testament scripture as words from the one true God and teach them to the people of Athens as they do not know the one true God. Athenians have a history of seeking wisdom and the wise to lead them, and they have developed a religion of their own of many lesser gods. Yet they lack knowledge of the one true God. We might look at their situation and find a parallel between their lack of knowledge of the one true God and their following of lesser gods and our own country's situation as our population moves from the truth of Christ and embraces false ideas. The knowledge of God and of His Son, Jesus, is growing dim in our country. Let's look at how Paul works to share the Good News in Athens and see if we can learn from his approach so that we might share Jesus with those around us.

We might wonder what the big deal is with all of the idols in Athens. Are they not beautiful works of art, many still with us today? We need to understand clearly what an idol is so that we might grasp the despair that comes to Paul. An idol is something made with human hands in an attempt to bring God from heaven into the place where we are, to give God form and confine God in human-imposed limits. God is the Creator of the universe, and humanity seeks to make Him into something we can see, something we can control, something we can limit and make dependent on us instead of us on Him. Making an idol allows humanity to tame God. An idol is not distant and we can control any perceived lack of responsiveness to our whims and desires. An idol allows us to take defined actions to break into the silence and hear from our idol the answers we want. When we make an idol, we seek to place ourselves into God's place. We attempt to become the creator and ruler.ⁱⁱ Idols are not limited to ancient Greece, Rome, or other

cultures that are less sophisticated than our own. An idol is anything in our lives that becomes a substitute for the true God. Anyone or anything we put into the place of God the Creator is an idol. Ideas we hold can become our idols. The list of what humanity can make into an idol is long. Examples include fame, wealth, power, sex, science, politics, food, alcohol, drugs, parents, spouse, children, friends, actors, work, recreation, television, possessions, church, religion, and our Christian service.ⁱⁱⁱ Idol worship is not a first century problem that went away as humanity matured. Idolatry continues as we place anything in our life into God's place. We must constantly be alert for idols we create or fall into the worship of, and be ever ready to realize we have placed something in God's place, to repent, and to cry out to God for forgiveness, asking Holy Spirit to guide us to right relationship with God. We should also be like Paul and become distressed for others whom we see as those caught up in idolatry.

As Paul moves around Athens, he begins to act on the distress in his heart and seeks opportunities to share the one true God whom the people in Athens do not know. Paul has a passion that comes from his distress to help people be free of their idols. Paul starts his mission consistently by going to the synagogues and sharing the Good News of Jesus with the Jews, those who know something about the one true God. In synagogues, Paul is able to draw from the Jews' knowledge of the one God and try to teach them about Jesus. Our churches are parallels to synagogues. We should ever be ready to share the Good News with others in our churches, building each other up and helping each other to grow into maturity in Christ. Our sharing of the Good News should begin with seeing, listening, and then sharing with each other. When we come together to worship God, we should be ready to share with each other how Jesus is working in our lives, what we have learned in the past week, and even where we struggle to grow into Jesus' image.

The next place that Paul goes to share the Gospel in Athens is into the marketplace. Luke does not detail for us how Paul shares in that context, but we find Paul out in the community, meeting people where they are and engaging them with not only the love of Jesus, but with the Good News of what God has done for them through His Son. I am not aware of a single place in Northumberland County where people gather in numbers and are available for a follower of Jesus to engage them with the Gospel. So often we will see the parallel today being drawn between the marketplace of Athens and the coffee shops of our cities. I don't think Northumberland County has a coffee shop, so we need to find other places to engage in our

community. The marketplace for us is any place where we can go and gather with others. It can be our homes where we meet with friends and family. The marketplace can be events where we are present and seeking to follow Jesus into his mission. I will confess that in Northumberland County, I still struggle to find what I see as a parallel to the marketplace of Athens. For Paul, the marketplace was where people engaged with each other as they lived. It was there Paul sought to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and we also as followers of Jesus should seek to share the Good News in our homes and community.

In Athens, the city of idols and gods, Paul finds a unique opportunity to share Jesus with people who do not know the one true God but are fascinated with new ideas. As Paul shares Jesus in the marketplace, word gets out that he is sharing something new and he is invited to come and to share with the Areopagus. Now the Areopagus is not a place but a group of people meeting together in Athens. The people who make up the Areopagus once were judges, but by Paul's time they were the keepers of Athens' religion. Their role was to decide what religious ideas, what new gods, should be added to their collection. As new ideas and gods arrived in Athens, members of the Areopagus listened to their representatives, and if they thought the new god had merit, if they thought the followers of the new god would hold a feast, build a beautiful temple, and adorn the temple with an idol of the new god, they would support the addition of a new god. Paul's invitation was a chance for him to share about the one true God with those who listened for new ideas. Now it is difficult for us to draw a parallel to this aspect of Paul's experience in Athens as we don't really have an Areopagus parallel in our culture. We might look to our universities, but they don't have the same role, even if they are a place for the exchange of new ideas. There may be a parallel in that those on our campuses have less and less knowledge of the true God and there are many idols on campuses today, but the parallel is not as applicable for us as we are not a college town. However, before we throw out Paul's experience, let's look at how he shares the Good News with those who do not have knowledge of the one true God to learn how we might share the Good News in our context where people lack understanding of God the Father.

While Paul was walking around Athens, he discovered an idol for an unknown God. Paul uses this idol that is already known to the Areopagus to begin to share with them about the one true God. With that connection, Paul first shares that God is the Creator of the universe, telling them that the Creator of everything we are aware of does not live in a temple built by human

hands. So, step one is to connect to something people understand and use that connection to point them to God as Creator. Next, Paul shares that the one true God is the Sustainer of life. God does not need anything and is not served by human hands. God does not need people to sustain Him, to provide for Him from their sacrifices. Instead, it is God who sustains us. All of the life that God creates He sustains. God sustains humanity and not we ourselves. Paul uses this point to help those listening begin to grasp more of the nature of the one true God.

For his third point, Paul moves to God as the Ruler of all nations. While Athens is a free city in the Roman Empire, the people there would be startled by the idea of Paul's God being in charge of the nations and not Rome. These words would raise issues among those who follow a different understanding of god but points those listening to the one true God's nature. Not only does God provide for His creation and sustain it, but He is the Ruler of all nations. God made all people from one man, Adam, and has guided people to inhabit the entire earth in the places and times they are to live so that they may seek God, reach out for Him, and find Him. God is not distant and far away; God is close, in control, and involved with His creation.

Next, Paul claims that God is the Father of human beings. The idea Paul is putting forth here is a general revelation, one that he can leverage from the Greek gods, as those who worship them see their gods as the source of humanity. Paul leverages the Athenians' misguided thoughts into the idea that the one true God is the Father of all human beings. Paul's approach gives us the ability to look at the ideas we find in the culture around us and then with caution use them to help people begin to encounter God. When we do this, we need to make sure the people are not equating the one true God with their ideas of other gods, but are using their ideas about their gods to point to revelation about the one true God. We should be mindful that only those in Christ, those adopted through Jesus and by the grace he has extended to us have accepted Jesus, have God as their Father. Yes, from a creation view, God is the Father of all creation, but for us to be daughters and sons of God, we have to believe in Jesus Christ. Then we are adopted into the relationship Jesus has with the Father.

The last point Paul makes in his speech before the Areopagus is that God is the Judge of the world. God has overlooked the ignorance of humanity but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. God has set a day when he will judge the world and has identified the man who will judge. Paul gives the Areopagus evidence of this judge by telling them God approves His judge by raising the man He has chosen from the dead. The judgment that is coming on the

world will be total. All will face judgment—rich, poor, famous, humble; none will escape. The judgment by God will be righteous. God is a just Judge showing no partiality, taking no bribes, making no bad decisions. Finally, Paul shares that the coming of judgment on the world is definite. God has set the day and time of judgment. That day is not yet disclosed to humanity. We remain ignorant of the time, but God has committed the judgment of the world to His Son and gives the world proof of His Son's role by raising him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the vindication that God has declared His Son to be both Lord and Judge. All nations were created from the first Adam, the source of all of humanity, and all of humanity will be judged by the last Adam, Jesus Christ.^{iv}

We have five points we can use to share with those who are ignorant of God as starting points for discussions about Jesus and the Good News: God is the Creator, God sustains His creation, God is the Father of all humanity, God is the Ruler of all nations, and God through His Son will judge all humanity. When Paul speaks about resurrection from the dead, his listeners in the Areopagus begin to stir as many of the Greek philosophers held there is no resurrection from the dead. Up to this point, they seem to have listened to him but with this last idea, some begin to ridicule him; yet some believe and follow Jesus. The response of the Areopagus is the response we should anticipate when we share with those who do not know God. Some will not be able to believe what we share, but others will. Our job is to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth, starting right here where we are.

So, let's see if in the coming days we all can begin to follow the example from Paul and learn to share the Good News of Jesus with those who are ignorant of God. We can all begin to walk around, looking, listening, and engaging people in our community. We can all go into the marketplaces in our communities, the places we gather with others, meet people where they are and talk with them about the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ who died for our sins and was resurrected so that we might be reconciled to God. Let Holy Spirit lead us to the places we are to go. Let our hearts become distressed with the idols we see in people's lives. Let us meet people who are ignorant of God and lead them, through the Son, into the kingdom of God. As we go about our days, let us become those who look, see, listen, speak, and share the Good News of Jesus Christ in all the places we can with all the people we can for all the time we are given.

We can start a conversation about God by simply telling someone that we heard something interesting Sunday morning at church about God and ask them if they would like to

hear it and then meet them where they are and share with them any or all of Paul's five points and see where our conversation goes from there. Let our hearts be distressed by the lack of knowledge of God in our community and the idols we find, and let that distress bring us to the point of risking to share Jesus with others. Only 2% of Christians in the United States ever share Jesus with someone else. Let's strive to change that statistic in this place.

Pray with me: Father God, give us hearts for those who do not know you. Jesus, teach us to meet people where they are and to love them as you love them. Holy Spirit, guide us to a community where we can share the Good News. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Look around and see the harvest fields that are ripe in our lives
and share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

ⁱ Acts 1:8 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3256-3257). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Stott, John. The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition

ⁱⁱⁱ Stott, John. The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition

^{iv} Ibid, all points in this section are from Stott's work on Acts.