

Sermon Manuscript: All Truth is God's Truth
Acts 17:16-34
by Heather Thomsen

Well, friends, I have a confession to make. Maybe you've never experienced this, but sometimes when I read the Bible I can find it somewhat hard to relate to. I mean, in Leviticus alone we have an entire chapter devoted to different kinds of mold! And there's also a robust conversation about which types of shellfish are ok to eat. What are we supposed to do with this stuff? And how in the world should this influence our daily lives?

This story from Acts about Paul in Athens does not feel obscure the way parts of Leviticus do. It speaks more easily into our world. Acts 17 is a text about cultural engagement, about how Christians are to be and live and act in an intellectual, sophisticated, religious, but decidedly non-Christian world ... the world of 1st century Athens, but also the world of 21st century Winston-Salem.

Athens was a city of sophistication and intellectualism. It was known for architecture and art, and for its pluralistic spirituality. It was the stomping grounds of the legends of Greek philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, and of course the granddaddy of it all, the great Socrates. Like, Winston, it was a "university town" for it was in Athens that Plato founded his renowned Academy for philosophy students. Intellectual rigor, innovation, sophistication and the arts might be described as the *cultural currency* of 1st century Athens. These were the defining ideas and concepts that people drew upon to participate in the social, political and economic life of the city. In some ways, this reminds me of Winston Salem, at least what I've come to appreciate about our city in the six months I've lived here.

Let's take a look at our story. Paul's arrival in Athens marks a departure from the way the writer of Acts has crafted the narrative thus far. Previously, when Paul arrives in a city, he makes a beeline for the Jewish synagogue. We see this in the beginning of Acts 17, when he goes to the synagogue in Thessalonica and then again in Berea. Here in Athens, Paul goes to the Jews, yes, but after verse 17 the Jews disappear from the story. Our focus shifts to the Athenian marketplace, called the Agora. The Agora was the seat of cultural, political and intellectual life in Athens, and might have been comparable to 4th street or Trade street here in Winston, with parks, city squares, business, coffee shops and bars, places where people meet to discuss and to participate in the evolving cultural life of the city. The Agora is fabled to be the place Socrates went to converse, much as Paul does in this story. The writer of Acts is setting a new stage here in Athens; Paul finds himself not in the synagogue but in the public square with his finger directly on the pulse of a vibrant, sophisticated and markedly pluralistic city.

Athens, clearly, is not a city devoted to Israel's God. It is full of idols, including one designated - rather ridiculously - to an unknown god. Talk about hedging your bets! The idol to an unknown god was designed to appease the wrath of whatever minor deity the Athenians might have forgotten to include in their vast pantheon. It is no wonder Paul is distressed because of this.

But Paul's actions are remarkable. Rather than expressing anger and condemning the Athenian worshippers for their paganism, he takes on the mantle of a Greek philosopher. He speaks to the Athenians using their rhetoric, their imagery, their concepts, their poetry, and their values.

Paul attracts enough attention in the marketplace that he is taken to the Areopagus for further audience. This of course begs the question, what is the Areopagus? It actually means two things. The Areopagus was the elite governing council in Athens, but it is also a hill, named after the governing body. Some folks from our church recently toured Greece, and went to this very hill where Paul may have stood while speaking to the Athenian elite. What's significant about the Areopagus is that Socrates himself was brought there when he was on trial. So here, in the city of Socrates, adopting the rhetorical style of Socrates, Paul defends the gospel in the very place Socrates defended himself before the courts. The writer of Acts is making a clear point about the way Paul engages the culture of Athens in order to communicate the gospel.

The content of Paul's sermon, at least initially, would have been acceptable to his audience. He appeals to the religiosity of the Athenians, saying, look, I can tell that you care about worship; you worship so many gods. And that's a good thing because seeking after God is what we are designed to do. And then Paul appeals to natural theology - that is, the way that God is seen through nature. This also would have been familiar to the Ancient Greeks; that's what Greek mythology is all about: how the actions of the gods are visible in and make sense of the natural world.

And even the hinge of Paul's message works within the currents of Greek philosophy. Paul roots his argument in wisdom. The word "philosophy" actually means the love of wisdom. Of all those cultural currencies I've mentioned, wisdom - the study and practice of philosophy - was probably chief of all, and Paul leverages that currency to make the case for the gospel. If the God Paul proclaims is indeed the Lord of all creation, the wisest thing to do is to turn to him and avoid judgment.

You know in 1 Corinthians when Paul writes, "I have become all things to all people?" This is what he means. Paul, the Jewish Pharisee turned Christian, is thinking and speaking and acting and being Greek, in order to communicate the message of the gospel in a way the Greeks would accept and understand. This reminds me of the character Jake Sully in the movie *Avatar* by James Cameron. Sully, a former Marine, adopts the language, culture, lifestyle and even the physical appearance of the blue-skinned Na'vi in order to be accepted into the Na'vi tribe so he could communicate with them. Paul is doing something kind of similar.

We've looked at the way Paul delivers the sermon. But what is the actual message the Athenians might have heard?

I think it could be that the gospel is not a message of fear.

The God Paul is proclaiming dispels fear. He is the creator who gives life to all things. This God is not angry or wrathful; instead He longs to be sought after. Nowhere does Paul judge or condemn the Athenians for their idolatry. He meets them where they're at, just as He says God has met them where they're at, making himself visible through the created world and through the things they already know about what it means to worship. Paul doesn't point fingers and doesn't use scare tactics. I imagine that this would have been a powerful message to a people who were so afraid of incurring the wrath of the gods that they built an altar to an unknown deity, just in case they accidentally angered one.

The good news of Israel's God is not a message of fear. But Paul doesn't stop there, he doesn't end with that. And that's because the gospel of Jesus Christ is also a message of truth.

While Paul affirms the Athenians' desire to seek after their gods, he doesn't let them settle for the false gods of the pantheon. He uses their impulse to worship as a springboard to point to the God of Israel. You have this unknown God, Paul says to them? Let me tell you who He is. He is the supreme Lord of heaven and earth, the one true God, YHWH. This God is revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ. Now, notice that Paul does not directly name Jesus, which I think is yet another sensitive move in communicating the gospel in an acceptable way to Paul's audience. But we who know the story recognize Jesus as the man who has been raised from the dead and who will judge the world in righteousness. Paul's desire to share common ground with the Athenians does not prevent him from proclaiming the scandal of the resurrection; *but* he is very intentional about telling the story in ways the Athenians understand.

The gospel is not a message of fear, but it is one of truth.

This is something we need to hear as much as the Athenians needed to hear it two thousand years ago. It is easy for us to be captive to fear, especially fear of a world that seems dark, broken and even godless and full of false idols. It's easy for us to hedge ourselves into Christian enclaves that are safe and protected from the outside world. But the story the Bible tells is of Christ conquering the powers of darkness. Even with the rampant evil all around, the resurrection assures us that this is still our Father's world, and we don't have to be afraid of it.

In the very beginning, God breathed life into the world, filled it with beautiful things, and called it good. We still live in that world. It still belongs to God and it's still full of beauty and goodness that point us to the Creator. Yes, the world is twisted and broken as a result of sin. We feel that heaviness every day. But the whole arc of Scripture points to a God who is at work throughout history to transform what is broken and restore all creation to the goodness for which it was designed.

A fascinating example of this is found in Isaiah 60, which is a picture of God's Holy City, or God's restored creation, what we often call heaven. In Isaiah 60, all the nations are streaming into this Holy City and are bringing with them artifacts from the created world. The wealth of the nations is brought in on the arms of the kings, and there are camels and flocks of sheep

and rams, and gold and frankincense and other goods and vessels of commerce, all things you'd find in an ancient city. All of this stuff is gathered into God's restored creation.

One really surprising reference is to the ships of Tarshish in verse 9. This reference seems quite insignificant to a modern reader, but for the Israelites in the ancient world, you might have well have cue'd the theme music for Jack Sparrow and the Black Pearl. The ships of Tarshish were sort of like pirate ships in that they were designed to be impressive symbols of power and strength and intimidation. Earlier in Isaiah chapter 2, the ships of Tarshish are described as proud and haughty. They represent opposition to Israel's God. In Psalm 48, it is said that God will shatter the ships of Tarshish because they represent self-exaltation and pride. Yet here they are in Isaiah 60, sailing in God's new creation, and it's clear that have indeed been brought low by God, stripped of their haughty, rebellious purposes and transformed for a beautiful and holy purpose: to bear the children of Israel into the Holy City.

The redemptive work of God through Christ by the power of the Spirit should dispel our fears and inspire trust that indeed God is making all things new. Because of this, we don't have to be afraid of "pagan" culture, because, as we see in this sermon in Athens, God can be revealed and known even in what is considered "ungodly". We don't have to be afraid of the brokenness in our world, because as we see in Isaiah 60, even things that represent rebellion against God can be transformed to serve God's holy purposes.

We don't have to be afraid, because the gospel is not a message of fear. But it is one of truth. And I think this text reminds us that ALL truth belongs to God.

I'm reminded of a story in *The Last Battle*, which is the concluding volume in the Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. The Narnia series is a supposal, it's a wondering, about what salvation history might look in a context outside of our world. In Narnia, Aslan the Lion represents the Christ figure. The Last Battle tells the story of the end of Narnia, and the movement of its characters into Aslan's Country, what we might call heaven - the richer and more real Narnia that is the restoration of the old Narnia.

A very unexpected character shows up in Aslan's Country. His name is Emeth, and he is a devout worshipper of the evil god, Tash, who is the anti-Aslan. Emeth is shocked when the great Lion welcomes him to his country. Emeth says to Aslan, "Alas, I am no son of Thine but the servant of Tash." Aslan said, "Child, all the service Thou has done to Tash I account as service done to me. For Tash and I are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if anyone swears by Tash and keeps the oath, it is by me he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and I who reward him. And if anyone does a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, child?" "But I have been seeking Tash all my days" said Emeth. "Beloved," said the Glorious One, "unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."

I love the way C.S. Lewis depicts Aslan as the source of all that is truly good and right. And I love how this plays out for Emeth, who spent his life seeking after that which is good and right and beautiful, he just didn't know it's true name. I don't think it's a coincidence that Emeth's name is the Hebrew word for truth. In Narnia, all that is really real, all that is true, belongs only to Aslan. This is why Aslan can claim Emeth as his beloved child.

And in our world, Scripture tells us again and again that all that is really real, all that is true, belong to our God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ. If we really believe that the gospel frees us from fear and proclaims truth that not only belongs to God but points us toward Him, this has got to affect our every day lives, here at First Presbyterian Church in downtown Winston Salem, in our neighborhoods and communities.

Paul's sermon in Athens presents a model for us today about how to leverage the currency of our culture for the sake of the gospel. If Paul could do it in Athens, we can do it in Winston. What is the cultural currency of Winston-Salem? What are the ideas and concepts that bring life to our community, that stir people to conversation and action? We *can* engage with the things our community cares about, and do it in a way that abounds with grace and generosity, but also points to Jesus. We can engage with the music communities at UNCSEA. Engage with the arts culture at Sawtooth and other galleries. Engage with the coffee shops that host concerts on Friday nights. We can be people who create beauty, and who contribute to the social, political and economic life of our city. Doing these things enables us to share Jesus in ways that our neighbors might actually accept and understand, because we're speaking their language. In a city that cares deeply about justice and beauty, we are pointing to a God who is the source of all justice, beauty and truth. After all, this is God's world. And *that* is why we don't have to be afraid.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.