



“Built for Seeking”

a sermon by

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Acts 17:16-34

Our Scripture lesson for this afternoon comes from Acts 17:16-34. Paul's missionary journey to the Gentiles is going full force by now. Paul was sent from Berea to Athens by the believers he had been traveling with, Silas and Timothy among them, because some enraged Jews from Thessalonica had followed him to the town and tried to incite the crowds of more sympathetic Jews and Gentiles against him. Paul waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy to join him. "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 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.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Someone recently remarked to me that Charlotte as a city was like an adolescent. It has growing pains, is pretty self-conscious and concerned about her image, particularly in relation to others. She is still trying to figure out what she wants to be when she grows up, but has a pretty good idea of where she'd like to be and is now just trying to get there. She can be sweet and charming and her heart is good but sometimes she just drives you crazy.

Well, if Charlotte is an adolescent struggling to secure her own identity, let alone define it as unique among many, Athens was a full-grown adult. In fact, it was a bit of a

stuffy, pompous adult. An intellectual overachiever, like any modern day ivy-league town, only to the nth degree, Athens was quite secure in its identity – it loved to hear itself talk, was charmed by its own wit, staggered by its own intellect, and was generally agitated by those who couldn't seem to keep up with the conversation. As Paul himself said, “all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” I'll admit that after living in Princeton for four years, I feel like I can understand Athens a little bit better. Because in Princeton, as in Athens, it – that is, life – was always about the next new thing, and it was always about honing the perfect argument. The Areopagus itself was on a rocky hill, Mars Hill, 370-foot high, northwest of the Acropolis in Athens. It was once famous as the sacred meeting place of the city's prime council, the stronghold of the city's aristocracy when the city was in its heyday about 400 years earlier. Slightly past its prime at the time of Paul, Athens was still a thriving university town and really was brilliant – a seamless blending of art, architecture, music, drama, philosophy, and politics found its home there, with daily life intermingled with a deep religiosity toward a multitude of gods. Its children were quite prodigious, educated in the arts and sciences, and raised on Homer's poetry. And it was in the heart, or rather, the head of the city, that Paul argued his case to the Athenians.

This is considered one of Paul's most important speeches, not because it shares any new innovation in his own style, but precisely because it is located in the seat of high culture, and because it is his only speech to non-believers. It was prompted by his soul being moved by an abundance of idols being worshiped, the image that is conjured up in the Greek is that of a forest of idols. There are amazing depths to the layers of his speech, with each line specifically suited to persuade the sensibilities of the Epicureans, or the Stoics, and nuanced in such a way that his critique of their religious practices does not go unnoticed but is not overt either as it is couched in flattery – “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.”

But what I find equally amazing is the irony that at the crux of Paul's argument to these intellectuals is the significance of ignorance, and the search for meaning. As a professor of mine would put it, the question that is on everyone's mind is poised, “what is a life, and why do we live it?,” and I would add, depending on the answers to those questions, who then do you worship? For all their conviction that everything – including worship – must be founded in reason, how odd that worship should take place at the altar of an unidentified deity. And so Paul fills in the blanks.

In an ancient culture where worship of a deity as a patron of a city was tied so closely to geography that land was imported from foreign soil if the god of that region was to be adopted and worshiped elsewhere, Paul states “the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands.” He cannot be confined by a city wall.

And to the Epicurians who believed life was born by chance, and that avoidance of pain and suffering was the true aim of life, Paul proposes a personal God who guided

the growth of humankind and “allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.”

And we begin to get the sense that Paul touches on a very sensitive matter for the Athenians for he exposes here not only ignorance, but longing. Vulnerability. For he professes that God not only cares for their existence, but sets the parameters of their living and their lives “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him.” Wow. “So that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him.” And the hardened mantle of intellectualism and stoicism, and materialism, and all the other “isms,” begins to crumble as it is revealed that all the searching for meaning, every instinct, every inquiry, every longing of the human heart for a greater depth of living is set into motion by God with the hopes that each of these things will lead us back to him. All their seeking is to the ends that God is found, and out of love, God will not force that ends to be achieved but will also not cease to beckon. Paul saw that their pantheon of deities revealed a hungering heart that looked everywhere else but could not find what only the Lord could provide.

In a society where knowledge is so highly prized and being an “adult” as an individual, as a community, somehow is supposed to equate with having all the answers, Paul encourages their spirit of curiosity and states that we are built for seeking – seeking after God. That it is not the answers, but the questions that would drive us to him. And in fact he is never far from any of us.

I would ask us to contemplate what it would have been like to step out onto the courts of the Aropeagus, before the inquisitive stares and self-righteous, scornful glares of the secular elite, and asked to not only defend but build from scratch the case for Christ. I would encourage us to enter imaginatively into that space where questions are not so discreetly uttered behind your back when teaching or professing your faith, “What does this babbler want to say?” This would be an interesting exercise except that I am certain we already know what it feels like. Perhaps a bowling ball in the stomach, or a cold sweat on the brow or down the spine. Called out to testify Jesus as Lord, to persuade the rest of the world that all they worship as hungry people is not just vanity, it is idolatry, and it is ignorance, and it will not satisfy.

And what if we looked for ourselves in the face of the stranger rather than denying that they are our brother and sister? If we spent half the time seeking God in the time we are given that we do questioning the number of our days. If we search for the Lord within the boundaries that have been set for us in the places where we live with even a portion of the intensity with which we struggle against them, then there is no telling what we would find. Because he promises he’s there. God – Jesus – there, and waiting. Beckoning. And if we gathered the energies and time spent on the repertoire of allegiances we adopt and altars we build and sacrifice to in search for meaning, in search of the answer to what is a life and why do we live it. And we gathered the courage to channel it all into the worship of the Lord who is not the underdog, who is not the local patron deity, but is the king over all queen cities, above every name and all else, if we directed everything within us into the seeking and worship of the one true God, sovereign

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe – can you imagine what life would be like?

This is the task of discipleship. Just a closer walk with God and helping others to do the same. And at any given moment we are at once as far away from this goal as ever, and closer than we will ever be. It all depends on how we seek to satisfy the appetites of our hungry hearts. It depends on if we seek. For “from one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being.” Amen.