

“Unknown No More”

“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

In last week’s reading from Acts, we heard about the murder of Stephen. As Luke details the brutal death of the first Christian martyr he writes, “At this (the Jews) covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at (Stephen), dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul...And Saul approved of their killing.” Then Luke tells us, “Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

Saul was the number-one enemy of the Church. He was devoted to hunting down disciples of Jesus and he made it his mission to destroy what he believed to be an attack on the faith of his fathers. And yet, it took one encounter with the Risen Christ to change everything. In Acts 9, Luke details the conversion of Saul where, in a flash of light, Christ meets him on the road to Damascus and for three days, Saul was completely blind. Then, through the hesitant help of a Christian named Ananias, Saul’s blindness was taken away, he was baptized, and he began to learn about the Messiah who had saved him. Luke tells us that after his conversion, “Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus” (and) at once, “began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’ Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah” (Acts 9:19-22).

The Resurrection of Jesus changed everything for Saul. Before his encounter with the Risen Christ, he was a Pharisee who was unmatched in his adherence to the law and unsurpassed in his hatred of Christ, but then his life was completely transformed! Paul became a disciple of Jesus and was God’s handpicked messenger to carry the Gospel to the very Gentiles that the Pharisee Saul had once hated. *This* is the Paul Luke is writing about in today’s text and as our reading from Acts 17 opens, we find this changed Paul in the midst of a city that personified the Gentile world and would have been the absolute antithesis of everything Paul believed.

Athens was the cultural center of the ancient world and the people of Athens prided themselves in their religious pluralism. As Paul made his way through the streets of the city, the signs of idol worship and pagan philosophy were everywhere. He was in a city that had no regard for the religious tradition in which Paul had been raised and would have considered the monotheism and moral requirements of the Jewish faith to be both outdated and illogical. For all intents and purposes Paul was in the midst of a godless and immoral place and, as he walked through Athens, we are told that, “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). It’s important that we stop here and consider just what this verse tells us about Paul. The ESV translation in our bulletin says that Paul’s “spirit was provoked.” The NIV translation tells us that Paul was “greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” and still other translations characterize Paul’s reaction as one of anger and revulsion. But there is more going on here than condescending disgust or moral indignation.

You see Paul knew what this meant for the people of Athens and he understood that this was more than an attack on the doctrines he held so dear. You see, the idols Paul saw in the city meant that these people were living without Christ! And that these men and women who so prided themselves on their intellectual sophistication were ultimately living and were also going to die with no hope. And I think it

was his compassion for these lost souls that distressed Paul and provoked his spirit, and this is why he approaches the people of Athens the way he does.

After debating in the synagogue with fellow Jews, Paul then moves the conversation into the marketplace. He carries the message of Jesus Christ with him into the arena of ordinary, everyday life and, as he interacts with the people of Athens who were always so taken with the latest and greatest ideas, they begin to ask Paul about his teaching and suddenly the conversation shifted from the mundane surroundings of the marketplace into the Areopagus where Paul was given the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel in a very public setting. And what does Paul do? *He meets them where they are!* “Men of Athens,” Paul says, “I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

This is amazing to me! Paul actually begins his sermon in the Areopagus by *complimenting* them! Paul could have condemned them for their idolatry. He could have ridiculed the lifeless statues that lined the walls of the Areopagus. He could’ve called on his extensive knowledge of the Old Testament and cited curses from Leviticus. He could have quoted the Law and damned them for their disobedience, but Paul knew his audience, and *Paul loved his audience*, and Paul met his audience where they were and then moved them toward the Risen Christ.

Was he angry about the idols he saw in Athens? Absolutely! Was he disgusted by the open immortality and hollow ideas of the Athenian philosophers? No question! But the Resurrection of Jesus Christ had changed Paul, and rather than standing in judgment or shouting out angry words of condemnation, Paul had compassion on them and he saw these misguided and worldly Athenians as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ changed Paul and today as we read this text, the question we need to consider is: How has the Resurrection changed us? And what is our Areopagus?

We live in a world very similar to the Athens of Acts 17. Our culture is replete with idols, our society is cynical about the Church, and religious pluralism is the order of the day. Athens is all around us and as we are provoked in spirit by the idolatry of *our* day, we need to stop and consider Acts 17, because the truth about Athens, is also true of our world: We are surrounded by brothers and sisters for whom Christ died and the only thing that will change them – *the only thing that will save them* – is the Holy Spirit working through the message of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This reading ends too early because as you read on in Acts 17, Luke tells us that, “when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ So Paul went out from their midst. *But some men joined him and believed*” (Acts 17:32-34). In today’s epistle reading, Peter writes that we should always be, “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (I Peter 3:15-16). The world needs hope and this hope doesn’t come from keeping the rules. This hope doesn’t come from judging others or from a message of condemnation. This hope and this faith and this life can only come from the Risen Christ. The love and forgiveness of the God who is unknown to the world *has saved us!* And as we carry the Gospel with us from our church and homes out into the marketplace and on to our Areopagus, people will be led to the Risen Christ, the Holy Spirit will work, and the world will believe. Go with the peace of this promise God has given you today: Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold