

This morning we are continuing through the book of Acts, looking at Luke's account of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church and what we can learn from it about what it means to know God and be His people. We are in Acts 17 this morning, and you will find that there are many similarities between this and the sermon from 2 weeks ago. We once again see Paul preaching to a Jewish audience and then to a Gentile, non-Jewish one. However, in the passage two weeks ago, there was a lengthy sermon to Jews, and a short address to the pagan audience. This time there is a short section about his ministry to the Jews, followed by a lengthy one to a pagan audience in Athens. Read Acts 17:1-34.

*<sup>NIV</sup> Acts 17:1 -When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. <sup>2</sup> As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. <sup>4</sup> Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. <sup>5</sup> But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. <sup>6</sup> But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." <sup>8</sup> When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. <sup>9</sup> Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. <sup>10</sup> As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. <sup>12</sup> Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. <sup>13</sup> When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. <sup>14</sup> The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. <sup>15</sup> The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.*

Let me quickly point out a couple of things. When Paul is speaking to a religious audience, he emphasizes the grand story of God's dealings with Israel and how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. He talks about sin and the need for

forgiveness, and how in Jesus is found the forgiveness of sins. But in Athens, with nonreligious people, he takes a very different approach, because of course, they would not recognize the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative or care about the story of Israel.

Secondly, notice how the Bereans listen to Paul and then examine the Scriptures to see if what he says lines up with what the Old Testament Scriptures say. This is exactly how to listen to me or any other preacher or author who claims to be speaking for God or teaching the Bible. The reality is that there are a lot of people out there claiming to teach the Bible who really aren't teaching things that line up with what the Bible actually says in context.

Let's continue:

*<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) <sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. **Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.** <sup>24</sup> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' <sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone-- an image*

made by man's design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. **He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.**" <sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." <sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council. <sup>34</sup> A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Paul walks around Athens and is distressed by all the idols he sees. Remember that the great sculptures of Athens were also temples and images of pagan divinities. It is right to have a holy discontent when God is mocked. Let me share four observations from this passage:

1) **Paul is mocked for sharing the gospel**

<sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods."

<sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

They did not believe that Paul's message could not appeal to reasonable people. They called him a babbler, someone who cobbles together a philosophy from the scraps of other teachings. But the experts want to hear him and invite him to speak about the gospel at the Areopagus.

The irony, though, is that while he is mocked, his message lives on today, while the Stoics and Epicureans, along with the gods of ancient Rome, have faded into history. Don't be discouraged when you are mocked. It is still the truth, and the competing philosophies of today will also fade into history.

2) **He looks for a point of connection**

Paul finds points of connection. He quotes from their poets and sees the altar to an unknown god. He doesn't even quote the Scriptures, but only quotes from Greek poets, Epimenides and Aratus.

*"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.*

*<sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

He finds a point of connection in the altar to an unknown God. And he quotes their poets. He can't start from the Old Testament Scriptures, so he looks for points of connection in their philosophy, their cultural narratives, and goes from there.

This is what missionaries do. Don & Carol Richardson were missionaries in the 1970's with the Sawi tribe in Indonesia. When they shared the gospel with the tribe, they found that the Sawi were interpreting Judas as the hero because they idealized treachery. They weren't sure how to share the gospel in a way that they would understand. But then they learned that when one village wanted to make peace with another village, they presented one of their children to that village as a Peace Child. As long as the peace child lived, there would be peace between the enemies. In this act, the Richardson's saw a metaphor for the gospel – a father giving his son to the enemy to restore peace and bring reconciliation. Jesus was God's peace child.

In many ways, we are missionaries in today's culture. Find points of connection in the cultural narrative, stories, and art of the culture so that you can share the gospel in ways that people will understand.

### 3) He shows them how they are really searching for God

He begins with their cultural narrative, and uses it as a springboard to proclaim the true God.

*"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.*

What is Paul saying? I see something in your culture that shows me that you realize there is something more out there. But you don't know what it is. Let me tell you about God. That is an altar to an unknown God: you are believing in something without really knowing what it is.

*Ecclesiastes 3:11 - He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

Let me share three “altars to an unknown God” that I see in today’s culture:

### **Meaning in life**

If you remove God from the picture, then objectively there is no meaning to the world. We are accidents of evolution, here by chance, who will one day die, and then one day the world will cease to exist. Now, most people who do not believe in God will balk at that. They will say “of course my life has meaning. I find meaning in my family, in nature, in my work, in the causes I am passionate about.”

*Stephen Jay Gould – “though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, it is ultimately liberating... We must construct those answers for ourselves.”*

To which I would say, yes, you are free to make up whatever meaning you want, but in the end you’re still making it up. There is no objective meaning.

But the thing is that we feel that there is meaning to this life. Even those who do not believe in God feel that there is meaning in family, in work, in causes we are passionate about. There is meaning in doing something to help another human being. We know there is meaning.

We feel that there is a meaning because there IS a meaning. That meaning is to know God. To glorify Him. To enjoy Him forever. To be brought into a love relationship with the God of the universe. To join Him in His mission to bring this world back to Him. There is meaning. And that meaning is greater than anything you can make up on your own. Because if your meaning is in anything in this world, it can be taken from you. But if your meaning and purpose and significance is in God, it is secure.

The search for meaning, the belief that life is meaningful and not just an accident, is an altar to an unknown God. It is a sign that there is something more.

### **Morality**

Most people believe there is right and wrong, even though without God all is relative. Think of the anthropologist believing that the way women are treated in some other cultures is wrong. Who are you to tell them that they are wrong and you are right? But you know deep down that there is a right and wrong, that some ways are better than others. What about Hitler? You know it is wrong. It's not just survival of the fittest.

Your sense of right and wrong, and belief that it is right to impose that on other people who are doing evil is an altar to an unknown God. What is unknown to you, let me proclaim to you. Let me tell you about this God.

And your desire that one day there would be justice in the world, that good will triumph over evil once and for all, is also an altar to an unknown God.

***Revelation 21:1-5** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." <sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

## **Love**

What about love? When you come to a funeral, you want to believe that love transcends the grave. That love lasts forever. But if you remove God, once again, that is a lie. Death cruelly takes away from you every love you've ever known.

*Carl Jung – "Death is indeed a fearful piece of brutality: there is no sense pretending otherwise. It is brutal not only as a physical event, but far more so psychically: a human being is torn away from us, and what remains is the icy stillness of death. There no longer exists any hope of a relationship, for all the bridges have been smashed at one blow."*

Deep down we know that death is not the end. We know that there has to be more than this. Love is an altar to an unknown God – let me tell you about this God.

The gospel proclaims that Jesus has conquered death. In John's gospel, in the Bible, Jesus was confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus. In her despair, Lazarus's sister Martha came to Jesus and said *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Jesus declares that the grave is not the end, that love does last forever for those who are in Him.

*Hebrews 2:14-15 <sup>14</sup> Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- <sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

Jesus is our champion, defeating death and sharing the spoils of victory with us. Death is not the end. Nor is life after death some impersonal merging with the universe. It is personal. It is love.

*1 Corinthians 13:12-13 <sup>12</sup> Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love*

On that day we will experience perfect love, forever.

Christianity, the gospel, makes sense of all the longings of our heart in a way that secularism never could.

#### 4) He calls them to repent and believe

*<sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*

After all this, Paul does not shy away from telling them they need to repent. Theory must become action. You are no longer ignorant now – you will stand before the judge.

*Hebrews 9:27 - Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,*

Turn from your idols to serve the true God. If it's true, then it demands your everything. He proclaims the resurrection, and they sneer at him. But it is either true or not. It is not just an idea. Either he rose from the dead or he didn't. If he did, you must believe and give your life to Him.

Many people in this world will not respond to a straightforward gospel. Look for points of connections, altars to an unknown God, and proclaim the true God.