

Acts 17:22-31

²²Then Paul stood up in front of the council of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. ²³For as I was walking around and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar on which had been inscribed, ‘To an unknown god.’ Now what you worship as unknown—this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made with hands. ²⁵Neither is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives all people life and breath and everything they have. ²⁶From one man, he made every nation of mankind to live over the entire face of the earth. He determined the appointed times and the boundaries where they would live. ²⁷He did this so they would seek God and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘Indeed, we are also his offspring.’

²⁹“Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by human skill and planning. ³⁰Although God overlooked the times of ignorance, he is now commanding all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he appointed. He provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Very Religious

I.

People of Athens, please stand up. Seriously, everyone here today who is from Athens, please stand up. I don’t see any.

Paul had arrived at Athens ahead of some others. He was just waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him there. As he waited, he explored the city. In the verses before today’s text, we are told: “He was very distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16, EHV). Paul was the kind of person who naturally started talking about the things that he saw and discussing them with others, both Jewish people in the synagogue and people he ran into in the marketplace.

“Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, ‘What is this seed picker trying to say?’” (Acts 17:18, EHV). Stoics looked for their gods in nature. Nature revealed the truth. Epicureans believed that the gods were material and made of the same building blocks as people; they didn’t bother with rituals or observances, but tried to live in harmony with the gods by means of their relationships.

As for the term “seed picker” they used for Paul, that is a very literal translation of the Greek. A “seed picker” was one who would pick up bits and pieces of culture and learning and pass them on without really understanding them. What was happening is that what Paul was saying as they debated didn’t really fit any of their expectations.

Stoics and Epicureans alike had their interest piqued. They wanted to learn more about what Paul was trying to say.

“Then Paul stood up in front of the council of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. ²³For as I was walking around and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar on which had been inscribed, “To an unknown god.” Now what you worship as unknown—this is what I am going to proclaim to you’” (Acts 17:22-23, EHV).

Though it might have lost some of its status as the ultimate cultural hub, Athens still remained a center of learning and understanding and philosophy. With all the culture and knowledge a person could soak in as one walked around, many would have been greatly impressed; Paul became distressed.

Among all the sculptures and the areas devoted to literature and understanding were many temples to all kinds of idols. Among all those little—and some not so little—shrines, Paul found one to “An Unknown God.” Just in case, the Athenians wanted to cover their bases. They had dedicated

a lot of space to all these various gods, but there was a chance they had missed one, so they made a shrine to whatever god they might have missed, too. The people of Athens were very religious.

Idolatry isn't really all that surprising. Paul explained that God made people and placed them in their various locations all over the earth "...so they would seek God and perhaps reach out for him and find him" (Acts 17:27, EHV). God made human beings to be religious. *Something* or *someone* has to fill that void in each individual.

II.

Who here today is from Athens?

Perhaps you are a visitor to Holy Trinity today and you're not really sure what you might find here. Perhaps you are looking for something to fill the religious void.

Most of those sitting in these pews today gather here on a regular basis. They have reached out, but they didn't find God—God found us. We come to worship the God the Bible shows to be the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's even the way our worship service began—in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. There is no question that this Triune God is at the center of our worship. For dedicated believers, the Triune God is at the center of our daily lives.

So...would Paul be able to begin today by saying: "People of the greater Grand Rapids area, I see that you are very religious in every way"?

There are certainly lots of Christians churches dotting this community of just about every possible denomination among Christians. There are lots of other religious groups, too—all kinds of other religions. I guess that's natural when you have so many people living in a metropolitan area.

Paul saw that the people of Athens were "religious in every way." At first that makes us think of all those churches, both Christian and non-Christian. People going there can be said to be "religious."

As he might look around at our culture today, perhaps "religious in every way" would show something else, too. Americans aren't as likely to erect altars and build shrines as people from other cultures. Or *are* we?

In my office is some Green Bay Packer paraphernalia; there's a little at my house, too. Almost all of it has been given to me by various members through the years. My first sports love is Indycar racing. Most of my Indycar paraphernalia I bought for myself. *I* am a mild sports fan. It's just casual entertainment for me.

Sports in general is more than casual entertainment for many. You could go into any number of homes and find what might be like shrines to the individual's favorite sports team. Walls filled with posters and signed jerseys and pictures. Replica trophies from the great victories of their team. The list is endless. It isn't just the collectibles. Sports fans devote time to their team. They learn everything there is to know. Stats fill their minds and their conversation. Debating the minutia of every game and the players involved seems to be what they live for.

I've picked on sports, but you could say the same about all kinds of American culture: musical groups and celebrities; cars: classic cars and muscle cars and sports cars; video games; parties and the social scene. No doubt I have only scratched the surface.

"I see you are very religious in every way." That which dominates your thoughts and your time is very religious. Even those who know the One true God—the Triune God—set him to the side at times in the pursuit of things that aren't gods at all—an unknown god.

III.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made with hands. ²⁵Neither is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives all people life and breath and everything they have" (Acts 17:24-25, EHV). Meet people where they are. That's always good advice when speaking about the Savior. Paul started where the people of Athens were. As he spoke about temples made with hands, they

turned their heads this way and that and noted all the shrines to the various gods.

Paul identified the God they did not know as the Creator God. He made everything and everyone. All over the world there are people. All can trace their origin to the God who created the whole universe.

“He did this so they would seek God and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27, EHV). People have a natural curiosity about where we come from and why we are here. That curiosity is God-given. He wants people to be in search of God. All the natural beauty of the world should send you in search of the true God.

“‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘Indeed, we are also his offspring’” (Acts 17:28, EHV). Philosophers and poets who knew nothing of the Unknown God still had sayings that indicated that he was out there...somewhere.

“Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by human skill and planning” (Acts 17:29, EHV). Idols filled all those temples and shrines to the various gods. But all those idols were mere human inventions, just like the idols of today. Though today’s idols aren’t carved images, they are no less the inventions of people than the gods carved out of silver and gold and stone and wood.

Remember that Paul was called a “seed picker” who didn’t really understand the culture he was speaking about. That verse went on: “Others said, ‘He seems to be someone who is proclaiming foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:17-18, EHV). Our text only concentrates on part of what Paul’s said to them; the part where he was showing them that the true God is the God the people of Athens knew nothing about.

That God is the One who sent Jesus. They needed to know more about him, because “Although God overlooked the times of ignorance, he is now commanding all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he appointed. He provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31, EHV). The good news is that Jesus died on the cross for all sins, including the sin of idolatry. Whether false worship is directed to idols of stone and wood or silver and gold, or the idols of our generation, Jesus paid for all those sins.

All through the Easter season we have been rejoicing in what the true God has done for all people. God’s proof of what Jesus did, in accordance with the plans of God devised from eternity, was to raise him from the dead.

While that God might be unknown to many, Christians recognize the founder of our religion as the Lord Jesus, who is not to be found in some grave somewhere, because he rose again from the dead. God’s proof is for everyone.

IV.

I hope that you are very religious. I *pray* that you are very religious. However, I’m not praying that you have the shallow religion of this world. I pray that you are not fixated on the idols of today—that the things and activities of this life don’t completely dominate your thinking. I hope and pray that your “very religious” nature is not restricted to Sunday mornings, and then everything is forgotten as you exit the building and get back to some other religion of life.

Look around, as Paul did, at your culture. Gather an understanding about what things within the culture are so important to so many—the things and people that far too many look to for hope.

Then use what you see in culture to meet people where they are, and show them the God that might be unknown to them. That unknown God has done everything for the salvation of all people.

Proclaim to your friends and neighbors what they know only as unknown. Teach them to be very religious in the only way that matters. Amen.