

## **Growing Passionate Disciples who are building a Passionate Church: The Heart of the Christian Story.**

September 18, 2005

Text: Acts 17:16- 34

### **Introduction**

The message of the *Gospel* is forever contemporary, but in an ever-changing culture it is important that we communicate this message in an accessible way. As we learn to become careful observers of the world around us, we will discover the open doors within our culture that present us with an opportunity to share how Jesus can transform a life.

As people who want to be used by *God* in this culture, we also need to be careful observers of our own lives, to ensure we are authentically living the message we are trying to convey.

### **Paul's 5 Card Trick**

As we turn to study Paul's response to the Athenians, remember he was talking to two groups: The Epicureans, whose basic motto was "Eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die" and the Stoics, whose central value is summed up in the phrase "Grin and bear it" (See the sermon from September 11<sup>th</sup> for more on the Epicureans and the Stoics)

Many a sermon has been based on Paul's model here and is known in preaching circles as the "The Five Card Trick" It consists of an introduction, three points and a conclusion:

#### **Here's Paul's introduction:**

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.<sup>23</sup> 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.' "

This is a most thoughtful introduction. A good introduction always begins where people are, and this is what Paul did. He began right where these

Athenians were. He did not denounce them, he did not attack their idolatry; in fact, he paid them a compliment as far as he could. He said to them "People of Athens, as I've been walking about your city, I've noticed one thing about you: You are a very religious people."

Then he said, "As I've been walking about, I found an altar to an unknown god." This is the God I want to talk about. What you worship ignorantly I have come to declare to you." It was a great introduction. It reveals the emptiness of paganism. If you do not worship the true God, there is no end to your search; you will keep going forever. There were 30,000 gods in Athens, but they had not had enough yet; they had also erected altars to an unknown god!

So having introduced his topic Paul goes on to lay out the story at the heart of the Christian faith. Listen to how Paul does this by presenting three points:

**Part I - God made the world**

**Part II - God made you for relationship with him**

**Part III - God has appointed a judge**

**Part I - God made the world**

<sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> 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.

What is Paul saying here? **First, that God is the Maker and not the one who was made.** God was not created by people; he is the One who makes people and everything else that exists in all the universe. He is the originator of all things.

**Second, God is the giver, and does not have any needs himself.** "The God who made the world and everything in it is not served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all people life and breath and everything." God is not looking for anything from people, as

idolatry and paganism taught. Men and women had to bring gifts to the gods, they had to do things for their gods, to appease them and sacrifice to them

Paul cancels all this out. He says the real God is one who gives, who pours out. He does not need anything from you. He does not live in temples made by people. I am sure he must have pointed to the Parthenon as he said that, for it was regarded as the home of Athene, the goddess for whom the city was named.

**The third great truth was to show how God draws people and does not seek to evade them.** To the pagans the gods dwelt on Mount Olympus, remote from humanity. People had to go through perilous and hazardous journeys in order to find and placate their gods, to seek them out and find them, while the gods hid themselves from them. But Paul's word is that the true God is not doing that.

In our own day, some of those who are the strongest supporters of Paul's argument are called cosmologists. These are scientists who study the origins of the Universe. Allan Rex Sandage, one of the greatest observational cosmologist in the world—who has deciphered the secrets of the stars, plumbed the mysteries of quasars, revealed the age of globular clusters, pinpointed the distances of remote galaxies, and quantified the universe's expansion is one supporter.

As he approached the stage at a 1985 conference on science and religion, there seemed to be little doubt where he would sit. The discussion would be about the origin of the universe, and the panel would be divided among those scientists who believed in God and those who didn't, with each viewpoint having its own side of the stage. Many of the attendees probably knew that the ethnically Jewish Sandage had been a virtual atheist even as a child. Many others undoubtedly believed that a scientist of his stature must surely be skeptical about God.

But the unexpected happened. Sandage set the room abuzz by turning and taking a chair among the theists. Even more dazzling, in the context of a talk about the Big Bang and its philosophical implications, he disclosed publicly that he had decided to become a Christian at age fifty.

The Big Bang, he told the rapt audience, was a supernatural event that cannot be explained within the realm of physics as we know it. Science had taken us to the First Event, but it can't take us further to the First Cause. The sudden emergence of matter, space, time, and energy pointed to the need for some kind of transcendence.

"It was my science that drove me to the conclusion that the world is much more complicated than can be explained by science," he would later tell a reporter. "It was only through the supernatural that I can understand the mystery of existence."

## **Part II - God made you for a relationship with Him**

<sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said".

The true God is the God of history. The events of human history have all been to this end -- that people might find God, that people might be motivated to search for him. Remember, Hebrews 11:6 says, "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him..." (Hebrews 11:6 RSV). In Jeremiah 29:13 we read, "Thus says the Lord: ... when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you" (Jeremiah 29:10a, 29:13b-14a RSV). God is urging people to seek him.

This is why history exists, that God may reveal himself as the God who draws men and women, who awakens them, who urges them to find him, to seek him, and who will reward those who diligently seek him.

Within our culture we can communicate this part of our story by talking about God's desire to be in relationship with people. We can discuss with people how an enemy has exploited our self-focused lives and taken away our chance to know God and

be with God. He has twisted the world to such an extent that we feel totally out of control. As a result, people live with high levels of anxiety. Living lives of excess helps to numb the pain and

deal with the increasing levels of anxiety. People seek significance in sexual relationships, cling to friendships of any kind.

We need to agree with people that they are living with high levels of anxiety and acknowledge that we too struggle with this contemporary woe. But in the midst of this struggle we can affirm that we know someone who gives us PEACE and POWER.

We are finding a peace regardless of the circumstance we face because we have peace with God. We are discovering a power from God that deals with our enemy, and God uses us as a channel of healing and transformation.

The **Revelation that** people in our culture so desperately need to know is that "God loves you" People need to know that God really wants to heal, transform, and meet us. People flocked to Jesus - a powerful preacher, healer, and leader. But people were convinced about God, because he loved them.

I am inviting us this year to cultivate a community where we are growing passionate people who are building a passionate church. As we do this, it is my prayer that people who become part of St. Augustine's the coming year will be drawn here because they will experience something of God's love in a way that is palpable.

### **Part III- He has appointed a Judge:**

Now, in the next section, the apostle concludes with a wonderful statement about people. Here we learn some new things:

"though indeed he is not far from each one of us.<sup>28</sup> 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.'<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,<sup>31</sup> 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." (Acts 17:27b-31 RSV)

What a fantastic statement! It begins with the fact of the dignity of people, recognizing that people are God's offspring, made in God's image and therefore have a capacity to respond to God. We are made for God. But right along with this the apostle mentions the tragedy of people. "Being God's offspring [which even your pagan poets recognize is true], we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of people." He is saying that, if it is true that we are made with a capacity for God, if we know that we are made to contain and reflect God, then it is not only insulting to God to make an idol of him, but it is also degrading to people. It is saying that we can be satisfied with things that are less than ourselves, that we can find satisfaction in trinkets and trifles and baubles, in material values.

The last thing Paul points out is people's responsibility. People have lived, he says, in "times of ignorance." Now, these "times of ignorance" need to be understood carefully. This phrase does not refer to a certain date on the calendar. It is not speaking of Old Testament times, as such, or of past generations before the present era. These "times of ignorance" are related only to the individual. That is, they refer to the times in your life, or my life, when we, as the offspring of God, creatures made by God and designed for God, were trying to satisfy ourselves with things that were less than God. This is always a time of ignorance, a time when a person is operating on a level that reveals his or her ignorance of reality. Paul declares that God overlooks these times. He does not wipe us out. He does not judge us, he does not hate us and reject us, but patiently waits while we live through these struggling times.

But the apostle further declares that when a person hears about Jesus, when he or she hears the good news that Jesus Christ is the way to the heart of God, then they are put in a most responsible position. When a man or woman learns the truth about Jesus, they then has a responsibility before God to change their mind, to go on no longer acting as they did before. That is what repentance means -- a change of mind. You are responsible to change your mind and lay hold of that which God has provided in Jesus Christ. Paul gives us here three great facts which underscore the importance of repentance:

**First, there is an inescapable day coming.** God has fixed a day when he will judge the world. Everyone knows this. You know it, don't you? You know there is a day coming when your life is going to be laid open before everyone, and all the value of it, or the lack of value, will be evident. There is coming a day when every life will be evaluated.

**Second, there is an unchallengeable Judge.** The One who will do the evaluating will not be a god, remote upon Mount Olympus, but he will be the Man Jesus Christ. Someone who has lived right here with us, who knows what human life is like, who has felt everything we feel. He will be the One who passes judgment on that day.

**Third, God has made this evident to all by an irrefutable fact:** He raised that Man from the dead. This is where Christianity ultimately rests. If you can disprove the resurrection of Jesus, you can destroy Christianity in one blow. But as long as that fact remains unshaken, undestroyed, Christianity is indestructible. It rests upon that one great demonstrable fact -- that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is the guarantee that all God says will happen. (Refer to the Sermon for March 27, 2005 for a detailed discussion on the validity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.)

Jesus is calling for revolutionaries who will stand with him in his peace and power to turn back the tide. If you embrace the solution Jesus gives through his death and resurrection, you will find that he will never leave you or forsake you.

As we grow as Passionate Disciples who are building a Passionate Church this is the Message that is to be the heart of our story. I would encourage you to memorize these three points so that in conversation with others you can share with them the way Paul shared with the Athenians.

So here they are again:

**Part I - God made the world**

**Part II - God made you for relationship with him**

**Part III - God has appointed a judge**

In verses 32-34 Luke gives us the reaction of Athenians. We should anticipate the same reaction when we share this message.

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." <sup>33</sup> At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup> But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:32-34 RSV)

**Some Scoffed:** That means their pride was threatened. Mocking is always the defense of pride when it feels itself attacked but has no logical defense; it resorts to ridicule. This is still the reaction of many today. Whenever they hear of Jesus, they begin to ridicule. But Christianity ridiculed is always a sign of weakness, an admission of defeat.

**Second, some delayed.** They succumbed to the curse of the intellectual -- academic detachment. They viewed themselves as outside the system they were examining and thus detached from it. "Everyone else is subject to this but us." So they said, "We will listen to you again on this; we need more evidence." These are the delaying tactics which many intellectuals are using today.

**But some believed.** That is the great word here. Some repented, changed their minds. This indicates that among these intellectuals there were earnest, honest people who were trying to find the answers to life.

When they hear the good news about Jesus, and understood what this fantastic gospel message really is:

- how it delivers people from their superstitious fears
- how it breaks through the darkness of people's minds and opens them up to the God of glory, the God of the universe,
- how it introduces them to the resurrected Lord who, risen from the dead, seizes the scepter of universal empire,
- their hearts respond, and they believe.

Here is one such, Dionysius the Areopagite. He was one of the judges, an intellectual, a ruler of the city, but he became a Christian. With him was a woman named Damaris. I am glad that Luke included the name, here, of a woman, for this indicated again that these Greek women were searching for answers in the midst of the pagan darkness in which they lived. There were others among them. We do not know how many, perhaps just a few. Athens was much more resistant than any other city would be (a university city always is), but there were some who believed.

Here then is a church planted in Athens. letters. We do not know what happened to the church at Athens except that here, in the midst of this darkness, the light of Jesus Christ began to shine, and a body was formed. From that body, power began to penetrate into the secluded areas of darkness where evil sat entrenched within this great intellectual capital of the world, and to shake men and women loose, and to set them free from the chains of darkness. May God grant that this may be true at St. Augustine's as we grow passionate disciples who are building a passionate church.

Amen