

May 21, 2017  
Easter 6  
Paul's Sermon at Athens  
Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21  
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Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

My best friend was on the debate team in high school. She was good! She was persuasive and powerful. I was in awe of her ability to speak with confidence and conviction. The thought of doing that myself made my stomach turn, my heart pound and my hands clammy.

I wonder if Paul felt like that when he stood in front of the Athenian debaters. He had been preaching and teaching in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Macedonia, Troas, Philippi . . . you might think he was used to it. He and Silas were thrown in jail for casting out a demon from a young girl, diminishing the income of her captors. After being released, they went to Thessalonica and got into a little dust up there, also.

The Jewish leaders became jealous of the conversions that Paul and Silas were inspiring among the people there. They hired a band of ruffians (yes, the Bible actually uses the term ruffians) to incite a riot in the city square. While everyone's attention was focused on the riot, the hired thugs looked for Paul and Silas so they could kill them. They fled to Beroea hoping to escape the murderous plot.

The Thessalonians heard of the conversions going on in Beroea and sent the thugs there to incite riots there also, hoping to silence Paul. A group of faithful believers escorted Paul to Athens where we find him today. New to Athens he walked around the city and what he saw disturbed and inspired him. The city was full of idols! The Greek word *κατείδωλος* translates to "A forest of idols"

Athens was an academic city where debate, philosophical discussion and finely crafted arguments were expected. Paul spoke before the Areopagus, the city council, where public debates were heard and verdicts were rendered as to the veracity of an argument. Paul lays out a reasoned debate, citing evidence to support this new theology he proposes.

The Epicureans - sort of like modern day hedonists – and the Stoics –who believed that the divine is in everything – accused him of proclaiming foreign deities, a legal charge that could get him thrown in jail again. They called him a babblers, a nasty insult. To babble is to proclaim an ill-conceived or intellectually impoverished idea that is not relevant to the modern era. These educated and skeptical listeners demand logical proof in their debates. Paul's focus is the altar he noticed in the city on which was inscribed "to an unknown god".

Here is his opening and he walks boldly through it revealing to them the God who CAN be known, and is known. He appeals to the Epicureans by proclaiming God as creator and life-giver, contrary to their philosophy that existence is merely by chance. Paraphrasing the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE poet Epimenides Paul introduces a God in whom we live and move and have our being not the other way around.

For the Stoics, he quotes a 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Stoic philosopher announcing that we, too are God's offspring. Quoting ancient poetry, not scripture Paul cites texts that these philosophers and scholar are familiar with. He has affirmed their current state of belief, quoted their ancient texts and finally ups the stakes by boldly proclaiming this new teaching that sounds so strange to the Athenians. He tells them: Because of Jesus Christ, appointed by God and raised from the dead the world has been judged righteous. This oration takes place in a very public place. Some who hear it remained skeptical, others were eager to hear more.

How might we use Paul's example as we engage our neighbors, with the good news of God revealed in Jesus Christ? Look around you, what idols do you see? What activities occupy our time? These are our idols, our religion. Is it sports, work, organizations, a new car, a bigger house?

Paul took the time to identify Athenian idols before he engaged the people at their point of their reality. He acknowledged their hard work as a manifestation of the human need to connect to the divine. He assures them that the God of whom he speaks IS knowable.

This is our point of entry into this story. We are called, like Paul to tell the good news. And this is the point at which many of us shy away. "I don't have the words." But you DO! We confess them in this place every week, to one another, sometimes mumbling and sometimes, dare I suggest, bored by them: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ God's only Son and in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life.

When your neighbor's garden bursts out in abundant flower and fruit say it out loud "creation is so beautiful, look at the bounty God has provided". When your co-worker gets a promotion praise God, out loud, for her intellect and hard work.

My friend is still a far better debater than I am. She is a far more confident speaker than I am. We have the confidence of knowing that it is in God that we live and move and have our being. We have the confidence of knowing that we are created in God's image to reveal God to the nations – or at the very least to our neighbors.

Have we convinced ourselves that we are not good enough, can't speak well enough, don't have the training? Are we afraid that our friends will reject us, laugh at us, or scoff at our crazy ideas. Don't be afraid.

Poet Marianne Williamson expresses our reluctance to proclaim God in the public sphere.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our Light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves, who am I to be - brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
You are a child of God....Your playing small does not serve God's Word.  
There is nothing faithful about shrinking  
So that other people won't feel unsure around you.  
We were born to make manifest  
The Glory of God that is within us.  
It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.  
As we let God's light shine,  
We unconsciously give others the power to do the same.  
As we are liberated from our own fears,  
God's presence automatically liberates others.

Be liberated, share the good news. Some who hear will be skeptical, some will be curious, some will follow. This is God's good news, not ours. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to speak boldly of God's love.

Go, say it out loud to whoever will listen: Christ is Risen, Alleluia!

Thanks be to God