

“More Honey With Flies”

Acts 17:16-31, Easter 6-A

May 21, 2017

Initially it might seem to us that St Paul's missionary experience in Athens turned out to be one of his less successful ventures. Some people jump to this conclusion—simply because they cannot find a letter in the New Testament that Paul wrote to the Athenians! But establishing a Christian congregation in Athens was never really St. Paul's intention at that time either!

Yes, Paul had recently left the continent of Asia as his primary mission field and had now ventured into the continent of Europe. There with the direction and the blessing of the Holy Spirit, Paul had established Christian churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

But the opening verse of our First Lesson today (v. 16) indicates that Paul was probably only going to spend a short time in Athens, in the great cultural center of the ancient world! Perhaps Paul had checked into the First Century version of the Hampton Inn, to receive some much-needed rest and relaxation. Paul was spending a few days in Athens waiting for the arrival of his two great associates—Silas and Timothy—to catch up with him there. From Athens, Silas and Timothy were scheduled to accompany Paul to Corinth, where he was hoping to establish a Christian congregation with their help! Something, in fact again, that Paul, Silas and Timothy—by the grace of God, ended up doing together!

For 5 centuries now, Athens had been the great cultural center of the then known world; the Queen of all ancient cities when it came to great literature, stupendous sculpture and the development of various Greek Philosophies. Athens had been the home of Socrates and Plato and the adopted home of some other notable philosophers such as Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno. And Athens is still regarded today by many historians, as the cradle of democracy; the birthplace of this whole new idea of a republic actually being governed by its citizenry!

Brothers and sisters, if St. Paul was supposed to check into the Hampton Inn, to take some time off of work, to sleep in late and to sit back in a nice easy chair and prop up his feet on a nice footstool--well this simply didn't happen!

I might be reading between the lines, but I have always imagined St. Paul as one of those people who could never sit still. Paul, with his “Type A” personality could never forget the fact either that he had been called upon by God: *“To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8-9)*

St. Paul, like Jesus, knew that time was of the essence and he said so repeatedly! One such place is Romans 13:11, where Paul writes: *“You know what time it is, how it is now high time for you to wake up from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers!”*

Well, whatever artistic appreciation the Apostle Paul may have had stirring up within him—over all of this magnificent Greek literature, architecture, stupendous sculpture, and the erudite speeches that were daily being given by various orators at that great public place—dedicated to the exchange of everyone's ideas—known the “Aeropagus” --- St. Paul could not overlook the fact that wherever he went his number one perception was that the city of Athens was tragically, just chocked full of idols! And as a man who had spent the majority of his life as a devout Jew, the First Commandment was always at the forefront and upmost in St. Paul's mind: *“You shall have no other gods” (Exodus 20:3-4)!*

Someone once said: “You can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar”—and most of us probably know what this means! We usually have **a much better chance of getting other people to listen to our sale’s pitch** or to listen to our **position on an important issue if we approach them in a** spirit of love and kindness, using some soft and gentle persuasion to hopefully make our point, rather than if we bombard them with some type of hostile confrontation.

Brothers and sisters, Paul doesn’t start his sermon by blasting these people because of their supposed belief in many different gods! St. Paul certainly knew—that in order for us to win the world to Christ—empowered by the Holy Spirit—that we sometimes have to venture out from underneath our comfort zones.

Paul’s normal routine, when he entered a new city—hoping to preach the Gospel there, was to go to the local Jewish synagogue and do his best, on the grounds of the Old Testament Scriptures, to convince faithful Jews that Jesus was their Promised Messiah.

Paul did this in Athens—and by the way—and received from those dear Jewish people in a much more cordial and hearty welcome—in their reception of him—than he had ever received by any Jewish audience in their synagogue before! So, at least, St. Paul had that much going for him!

But the news of Paul’s preaching a new message in Athens must have **somehow reached the ears of the scholarly men in Athens, both the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers—for they invited Paul to come to the Aeropagus**—at the summit of a little mountain with plenty of seating—and proclaim his message there.

Paul’s message to them about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was especially shocking—since the Greeks believed that the most valuable part of any human being is their mind and spirit; their soul—if you please—while the physical body was for the most part inconsequential – since the body would eventually die, rot and decay!

So please listen again, just how gentle Paul is in his approach to these people, whom he knew in his heart and mind, were people for whom the Lord Jesus Christ also had lived his perfect life, dying upon the cross for these people’s sins, just as he had done so for Paul’s own sin!

St Paul **did not begin his witness to the Gospel** to these highly educated Greek men by clubbing them with a sledgehammer of verbal accusations. He could have you know! He could have raised his voice and said to them: “Shame on you, Athenians, for having so many gods! How can you possibly worship an unknown god? You claim to be philosophers and don’t know who God really is! Where are your brains!?”

No, St. Paul doesn’t do this at all because he knew that you can always attract more flies with honey than with vinegar! Therefore Paul, in attempting to establish rapport with his audience actually compliments them!

“Men of Athens,” he began, “I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription: “To an unknown god!” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I will proclaim to you!”

First, Paul began by seeking to get these men’s attentions! Then Paul was off and running, using the kind of eloquent speech and rhetorical skills for which he had also become well-known: *“What therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (v. 23)!*

So what is Paul's approach to these highly intellectual people?

In verses 24-28, we can see that St. Paul having now identified himself with his audience—in that he too—was a deeply spiritual person—began to talk about the true God! Paul started at the beginning, with God as Creator, the Source of all life. He told how God guided history and is the One on whom all life depends. Paul says: "We live 'in him' and 'we are his offspring,' meaning we don't even take a breath without his giving it to us. He found contact with these people on the grounds of our common humanity!

Then Paul continued: *"Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all of us by raising him from the dead"* (Acts 17:28-31).

St. Paul knew that when our Lord Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary—that this was really the invasion by God into our human souls. The resurrection of this Incarnate ONE means we have to deal with him one way or another. He cannot be ignored!

Ultimately then, our message must call people to respond to the Gospel. We have to publicly announce what it is exactly we do believe about Jesus Christ!

When Martin Luther was called upon by the Church authorities at the Diet of Worms to recant of all of his writings and to deny them as being true, he wasn't wishy-washy about his deep-seeded conviction. He didn't say: "I am inclined to think!" No, instead he said, "Unless you can convince me on the grounds of Scripture and of my conscience—that what I have written is in error, then I cannot and I will not recant! Here I stand, I can do no other!"

The next step, of course, was that Paul asked the Athenians to turn away from their old gods to the God who gave them life. Couldn't we be that wise, too? Let's ask people to "Try God." **But finally, we must then come right out and say It! (verses 30-31).**

We must finally come right out and say it! We must make truth clear. **There is a community in Washington State which is located on a river, downstream from a large timber-cutting project. The logs are floated down the river to their destination, which is the saw mill below. It became the practice for the people to fish the logs out of the water, saw off the ends that had the company name printed on them, and build houses and buildings for themselves from them.** The local minister heard about this practice and became very upset, and the following Sunday he preached a sermon with the title, "Thou shalt not steal." At the conclusion of the service, as the people filed out the door, they all told him what a fine sermon it was, so he knew they had missed the point. The next Sunday he preached on the subject, "Thou shalt not cut the ends off of other people's logs," and they got the point! (Of course, that preacher had to move to another church, but they got the point!)

Paul believed, therefore, that he was beginning his public witness to the Athenian philosophers by meeting them exactly where they already were at, spiritually speaking, that day!

Paul knew what we so often forget today that people are dying for a clear Word from God. We must not make them wade through a veritable morass of trappings that only hide the Gospel. There comes a time in the Christian witness when we must speak boldly and plainly of sin, of the need for confession and repentance, of Christ and his death and resurrection, **and take the risk of being switched off by the participants in the dialogue.**

St. Paul's sermon that day was not without success! Just listen to the four verses following our first lesson from Acts 17 today: *“When the Greek philosophers heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some mocked him; but others said, “We will hear you again about this!” At that point Paul left them, but some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius, the Aeropagite and a woman named Damarius, and others with them! AMEN*