

## **Sermon, May 17, 2020**

Good morning! Welcome again to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and this morning Sean and Evan Beachy will join us to provide Special Music. Still no word from officials on when our worship life can return to normal. Or what normal will likely look like. Meanwhile please continue to support your church, and also consider sharing our service with others if you reached it through Facebook. Our virtual Sunday School continues to be both fun and educational. Thank you Nicole, Ashley and Taylor for that. If you have children or grandchildren who may be interested, please call the church office and we will send you the link.

---

### **The Lord be with you.**

Let us pray. Almighty and ever-living God, you hold together all things in heaven and on earth. In your great mercy, receive the prayers of all your children; and give to all the world the Spirit of your truth and peace, through Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

---

### **A reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the seventeenth chapter.**

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

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, 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. 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, 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.

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.' 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. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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."

**Here ends the reading.**

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the fourteenth chapter.

[Jesus said to the disciples] "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

## **The Gospel of the Lord**

---

**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

In our Gospel reading from John today Jesus discussed with the disciples the third person of the trinity, who in various English translations is called the Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete, The Helper, the Spirit of Truth AND the Holy Spirit.

Critics say according to these and other references, the fourth gospel sometimes makes it sound as if the Spirit's role is primarily "subordinate substitute," coming in off the bench to take the place of Jesus for now; but eventually Jesus himself will be back. John's theology is decidedly different from so-called Orthodox trinitarian theology. It tends to subordinate God's third person. That's the sort of thinking that contributed to the Great Schism that divided the Eastern and Western churches nearly a thousand years ago. But that's a different sermon, and maybe a discussion that should wait a couple of weeks, when we celebrate Trinity Sunday.

During most of the Church year, our first readings come from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. But during Easter season, they are drawn from the book called the Acts of the Apostles.

As I mentioned last week, Acts purports to tell the story of the early Church, from Jesus' ascension to Pentecost; to Paul's three mission trips, and the spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire, from the Near East to Asia to Europe.

While Peter is the most prominent character in the first half of Acts, the focus abruptly shifts to Paul for the second half. And Paul ends up being

not only the most important human figure in the Book of Acts, but arguably the most important human figure in Christianity.

Even though he wrote great sermons in the form of Epistles for the Roman Christians, the Philippians, the Corinthians and the like, Paul himself wasn't much of a public speaker, at least according to Paul.

Acts, however, presents Paul as a gifted orator, and the book includes a bunch of Paul's sermons, that sound a lot like each other. But unfortunately, NOT much like those sermons or Epistles that are known to have been written by Paul.

Our first reading today was part of perhaps the greatest of Paul's nine speeches in the Book of Acts. (Or ten, or twelve, depending on who is counting.) It was set before the Areopagus in the Greek city of Athens.

If you have been to Athens you probably know the Areopagus. In Greek its name means, "Large Rock of the Greek God Ares." The Romans called it "Mars Hill." It is an impressive marble stone outcropping that sits on a prominent hill just northwest of the Acropolis. Since centuries before Paul's time the Areopagus was the place where the city's Council of Elders gathered to hear and decide cases of criminal and civil law.

By Paul's time it was also the place where prominent figures from the various schools of Greek philosophy would gather to debate matters of ethics, philosophy and religion. The name Areopagus was also applied to the panel itself--not just the place. Kind of like we use the words "Supreme Court" not just for the building, but for the panel of judges who sit there.

It is unclear in Acts if Paul, who had been chased out of various synagogues for his preaching, was politely INVITED to join the discussion at the Areopagus, or if he had been hauled off before the group for some sort of trial or hearing.

Either way, this was probably Paul's toughest audience. Before he even opened his mouth they referred to him as a "babbler" according to most English translations.

But in the original Greek what they really called him was a *spe r mol og oj* , which literally means "seed-gatherer."

Meaning they thought of Paul as unsophisticated and unrefined. Today we might translate *spe r mol og oj* as "hayseed." Tennessee Ernie Ford would have called him a "Pea-picker."

Athens at the time was the intellectual and cultural center of the civilized world and the Athenian elite held rather high opinions of themselves. As a rule they were not really interested in the beliefs or ideas of "pea-pickers."

Arguing religion before the Areopagus maybe doesn't sound like such a big deal to you. But it WOULD have been a big deal to the early readers of the Book of Acts. And an especially HUGE deal to Paul.

Why? Because Paul was a classically-educated Hellenized Jew who would have extensively studied the great Greek philosophers like Socrates--often credited as the greatest Philosopher of all time.

In fact Socrates to this day is widely recognized as the original source of much Western thought, from politics to ethics, and philosophy to logic.

And I'm thinking it is no coincidence that Socrates ALSO delivered HIS most famous speech before the distinguished gathering of the Areopagus, over four centuries earlier. His sermon ALSO addressed the complex polytheistic religion of the cultured, sophisticated Athenians. For Socrates that was the speech that got him killed.

Paul's speech before the Areopagus is not without its critics either. They point out that he began by presenting the Jewish God as merely

ONE of the Gods rather than the only God, apparently betraying Judeo-Christian monotheism.

But Paul then went on to identify his God as the creator of the universe and divine parent of all human beings. The God in whom we live and move and have our very being.

And unlike the other deities of the Greek pantheon, who were viewed as distant and disinterested in the lives of people, Paul said his God was never far from us. So when it comes to Paul's ONE God, it appears one would hardly need or have use for any others.

And again I think not coincidentally, the case Paul made in favor of his God sounds remarkably similar to that of Socrates, who argued that the single inner voice that guided him throughout his life rendered the Pantheon largely irrelevant and unnecessary.

In the end, Paul's sermon got mixed reviews. Acts says some scoffed at him. Others said they'd like to hear more. And apparently a few folks became believers.

Sure, it's a bit awkward, but mostly I like Paul's speech before the Areopagus, even today. For one thing it's a good model for the way we witness to our faith. Trying first to understand the perspective and beliefs that other people have, without finger-pointing, name-calling or accusations that anyone who doesn't happen to agree with us is flat-out wrong. Outsiders as a rule are drawn to Christianity mostly by what we do, not what we think or say. Judgment and criticism have never been good strategies for mission and evangelism.

I also like Paul's speech because it reminds us that our God is a hands-on God. One never too busy or self-absorbed to get mixed up in the messiness of OUR lives.

When we are hurting, or sad, or lonely or lost, God is not somewhere off on a distant mountain top or way up in the sky. God is beside us and

with us when we are hurting; always behind us and lighting the way ahead of us, at the very times we need God most...

Which brings me back to our gospel reading from John chapter fourteen. In verse 18, Jesus promised not to leave us orphaned. The Greek word is orphanous, and literally that means, "Without parents." But orphanous can also mean, "Abandoned. Helpless. Unprotected." In other words, it can refer to times of vulnerability characterized by loneliness, fear and uncertainty. That can happen to any of God's people at different times and in different circumstances, whether their parents are with them or not. People like us. In uncertain times and scary circumstances like these.

Difficult times when we can't see our friends. We can't go to school. Some can longer go to work. Others no longer have work to go to. In sheltering at home, I'm sure I get on my wife's nerves, and these days my dog doesn't seem as happy to see me as she used to be. Meanwhile, millions don't have enough food for their families and can't afford to pay their credit cards, utility bills and mortgages.

I really don't think Acts' or John's author intended to give us a lecture on theology. But instead to assure us that both then and now, God knows when we are struggling and need God's support. Promising better days ahead, but in the meantime assuring us that God is with us. Especially with those who may otherwise be, or at least feel alone. Consoling us in our fears and grief. Helping us always to feel and appreciate the love of God, either as Father, or Son, Spirit or Paraclete; and the love of each other, that keep getting us through even these most difficult days.

**Amen**