

**“CRITICAL DIFFERENCES!”**

**A SERMON BASED ON THE NEW TESTAMENT  
BOOK OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (ACTS  
17:22-31) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC  
ON MAY 17, 2020----- (THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE  
EASTER SEASON, 2020)**

TODAY OUR JOURNEY WITH THE EARLIEST  
APOSTLES CONTINUES WITH PAUL IN ATHENS.

HE GOT THERE AFTER BEING RUN OUT OF  
BEROEA, AND THAT’S WHAT MAKES THE STORY  
OF HIS EXPERIENCE IN ATHENS SO  
COMPELLING: HERE HE MEETS RESISTANCE OF  
A DIFFERENT SORT. UP TO NOW, HE’D  
APPEALED TO THE JEWS TO ACCEPT JESUS AS  
THE PROMISED MESSIAH OF THE JEWISH FAITH.

AND THAT GOT HIM INTO TROUBLE TIME AND AGAIN. WHILE SOME BELIEVED, OTHERS WERE OPENLY HOSTILE. THEY'D DRIVE HIM OUT OF THIS TOWN OR THAT ONE AND, ON ONE OCCASION, THEY STONED HIM TO WITHIN AN INCH OF HIS LIFE.

*NOT SO IN ATHENS.*

HERE PAUL MAKES HIS APPEAL, NOT TO A JEWISH AUDIENCE, BUT TO THE MOST LEARNED, WELL-EDUCATED, SOPHISTICATED SCHOLARS OF THE DAY. THEIR RESPONSE IS TELLING: THEY'RE CORDIAL. THEY LISTEN WITH GREAT INTEREST. THEY DON'T ARGUE WITH PAUL OR TRY TO CONFRONT HIM IN ANY WAY.

**IF ANYTHING, THEY'RE CURIOUS TO KNOW MORE, BUT HERE'S THE CATCH: THEY HAVE NO INTEREST WHATSOEVER IN COMMITTING THEMSELVES TO ANY HIGHER AUTHORITY THAN THE GOSPEL OF ENLIGHTENMENT.**

**AND THAT'S WHAT I'D LIKE FOR US TO THINK ABOUT THIS MORNING – HOW THE GOSPEL CALLS US TO DECIDE BETWEEN THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD AND THE LOVE OF GOD MADE SURE FOR US IN THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST. TO BE MORE SPECIFIC, I CAN THINK OF AT LEAST THREE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES:**

**• THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING RELIGIOUS  
AND BEING FAITHFUL;**

**• THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND  
KNOWING; AND**

**• THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CURIOSITY AND  
COMMITMENT.**

FIRST, LET'S BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT  
HAPPENED. LUKE SAYS THAT PAUL GOT TO  
ATHENS BY WAY OF ESCAPE FROM BEROEA.  
ACTUALLY, THE BEROEANS WERE RECEPTIVE  
OF PAUL. IT WAS THE JEWS FROM  
THESSALONICA THAT CAUSED THE TROUBLE.

THEY'D RUN HIM OUT OF THESSALONICA AND, WHEN THEY HEARD THAT HE'D GONE TO BEROEA, THEY CAME AFTER HIM. THEY WEREN'T GOING TO REST UNTIL HE WAS OUT OF THE COUNTRY ALTOGETHER. PAUL HAD LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO PACK UP AND LEAVE. SO, HE GOT ON THE FIRST SHIP TO ATHENS.

NOW, IT'S NOT HARD TO IMAGINE WHY PAUL WANTED TO GO TO ATHENS. IT WAS THE COSMOPOLITAN CENTER OF THE WORLD IN THAT DAY. ONE SOURCE DESCRIBES ATHENS THIS WAY:

**“CLASSICAL ATHENS WAS A POWERFUL CITY-STATE. A CENTER FOR THE ARTS, LEARNING AND PHILOSOPHY, HOME OF PLATO’S ACADEMY AND ARISTOTLE’S LYCEUM, ATHENS WAS ALSO THE BIRTHPLACE OF SOCRATES, PERICLES, SOPHOCLES AND ITS MANY OTHER PROMINENT PHILOSOPHERS, WRITERS AND POLITICIANS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD. IT IS WIDELY REFERRED TO AS THE CRADLE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION AND THE BIRTHPLACE OF DEMOCRACY ....”**

**GOING TO ATHENS IN PAUL’S DAY WOULD BE COMPARABLE TO OUR GOING TO NEW YORK CITY OR LONDON OR PARIS TODAY. IT WAS WHERE THE ACTION WAS.**

WHEN HE GOT THERE, THE FIRST THING HE SAW WAS THAT IT WAS FULL OF IDOLS. THERE WERE STATUES AND MONUMENTS INSCRIBED TO EVERY KNOWN GREEK GOD AND GODDESS OF THE DAY, AND, IF YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT GREEK MYTHOLOGY, THERE WERE A BUNCH OF THEM: APOLLO, APHRODITE, ARES AND ATHENA, TO MENTION BUT A FEW. IF THAT WEREN'T ENOUGH, PAUL NOTICED THAT THE ATHENIANS HAD EVEN ERECTED A STATUE TO AN "UNKNOWN GOD," JUST IN CASE THEY'D LEFT ONE OUT. THEY WANTED TO COVER ALL THE BASES.

NOT TO BE DISSUADED, PAUL BEGAN TO PREACH OPENLY, BOTH IN THE SYNAGOGUE AND IN THE MARKETPLACE. THE AGORA IN EVERY GREEK CITY WAS A POPULAR GATHERING PLACE, AND IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN HARD FOR PAUL TO GET THE ATTENTION OF BYSTANDERS MILLING AROUND.

AMONG THOSE WHO HEARD PAUL WERE SOME EPICUREAN AND STOIC PHILOSOPHERS.

UNDERSTAND, THESE WERE NOT PRIESTS OR RABBIS OR RELIGIOUS MEN IN ANY WAY. THEY WERE PHILOSOPHERS. THEIR BUSINESS WAS TO MULL OVER AND DEBATE THE GREAT MYSTERIES OF LIFE.

FOR EXAMPLE: IF A TREE FALLS IN THE FOREST, BUT THERE'S NO ONE THERE TO HEAR IT, DOES IT MAKE A SOUND? THAT'S THE WORLD OF PHILOSOPHY. SO, WHEN THEY HEARD PAUL EXPOUNDING WHAT SOUNDED LIKE A NEW THEORY OF SALVATION, THEIR EARS PERKED UP, AND THEY INVITED HIM TO SPEAK AT THE AREOPAGUS.

NOW, THE AREOPAGUS WAS THE INTELLECTUAL FORUM OF ATHENS. IT WAS SITUATED ON A CRAGGY HILL OVERLOOKING THE CITY AND NAMED AFTER THE GREEK GOD, ARES, KNOWN IN LATIN AS MARS.

THAT'S WHY YOU OFTEN HEAR IT REFERRED TO AS MARS HILL. FOR PAUL TO BE INVITED TO SPEAK AT THE AREOPAGUS WAS THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME. THINK OF IT AS A MUSICIAN BEING INVITED TO GIVE A RECITAL AT CARNEGIE HALL..... IT WAS SHOW TIME.

HE BEGAN AS A SEASONED DIPLOMAT. HE SAID, "I PERCEIVE THAT YOU ARE RELIGIOUS IN EVERY WAY," REFERRING TO ALL THE IDOLS DOWN BELOW. BUT IT WAS THE TRUTH – THE ATHENIANS WEREN'T HEATHENS. IF ANYTHING, THEY WERE OVERLY RELIGIOUS.

THEN, REFERRING TO THE STATUES AND  
MONUMENTS, PAUL POINTED OUT THAT ONE  
WAS TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. THIS GAVE HIM THE  
CHINK IN THE ARMOR HE NEEDED. HE  
PROCEEDED TO GIVE THAT GOD A NAME. HE  
SAID,

*“WHAT THEREFORE YOU WORSHIP IN  
IGNORANCE,  
THIS I ANNOUNCE TO YOU.  
THE GOD WHO MADE THE WORLD AND ALL  
THINGS IN IT,  
HE, BEING LORD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH,  
DOESN'T DWELL IN TEMPLES MADE WITH  
HANDS,*

***NEITHER IS HE SERVED BY MEN'S HANDS,  
AS THOUGH HE NEEDED ANYTHING,  
SEEING HE HIMSELF GIVES TO ALL LIFE AND  
BREATH,  
AND ALL THINGS."* (ACTS 17:23-25)**

**THEN HE CALLED THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS  
TO REPENT AND ACCEPT JESUS AS LORD AND  
SAVIOR, LEST THEY BE CAUGHT SHORT ON THE  
DAY OF JUDGMENT. AND NOTICE HOW HE PUT  
IT. HE SAID:**

***“THE TIMES OF IGNORANCE THEREFORE GOD  
OVERLOOKED.  
BUT NOW HE COMMANDS THAT ALL PEOPLE  
EVERYWHERE SHOULD REPENT,  
BECAUSE HE HAS APPOINTED A DAY  
IN WHICH HE WILL JUDGE THE WORLD IN  
RIGHTEOUSNESS  
BY THE MAN WHOM HE HAS ORDAINED;  
OF WHICH HE HAS GIVEN ASSURANCE TO ALL  
MEN,  
IN THAT HE HAS RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD.”  
(ACTS 17:30-31)***

THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS WERE HARDLY IGNORANT OR STUPID OR ILL-INFORMED. PAUL'S WORDS MUST HAVE STUNG THEM LIKE A SLAP IN THE FACE. NOT SURPRISINGLY, THIS IS WHERE HIS LITTLE DIATRIBE ENDED.

SOME WERE POLITE: "VERY INTERESTING. COME BACK SOMETIME AND TELL US MORE," THEY SAID. OTHERS SCOFFED AND MOCKED PAUL FOR PROCLAIMING SUCH NONSENSE AS THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD. TO THEIR MINDS – AND THIS IS THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD SPEAKING – THIS WAS IMPOSSIBLE, ILLOGICAL AND TOTALLY OUT OF THE QUESTION.

**AND THAT'S THE CRUX OF THE MATTER: THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST FLIES IN THE FACE OF COMMON SENSE, SO THAT YOU HAVE TO DECIDE WHETHER YOU'RE GOING TO FOLLOW THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD OR WALK BY FAITH IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS CHRIST.**

**I SAID UP-FRONT, THERE ARE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES. THE FIRST HAS TO DO WITH BEING RELIGIOUS, AS OPPOSED TO BEING FAITHFUL. THE GREEKS WERE OVERLY RELIGIOUS. THEY BOWED DOWN TO MANY GODS, BUT THEY WERE OBLIVIOUS TO THE SAVING GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST.**

IN HIS LIFETIME, JESUS HAD LITTLE TO DO WITH RELIGIOUS PEOPLE. IN FACT, IT WAS THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OF HIS DAY THAT GAVE HIM GRIEF. HE SHOWED MERCY ON PROSTITUTES, LEPERS AND TAX COLLECTORS; HE EVEN REFERRED TO SAMARITANS AND GENTILES AS MODELS OF FAITH; BUT HE HAD NOTHING BUT HARSH WORDS FOR THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OF HIS DAY. HE SAID,

**“WOE TO YOU, SCRIBES AND PHARISEES,  
HYPOCRITES!  
FOR YOU TITHE MINT, DILL, AND CUMIN,  
AND HAVE LEFT UNDONE THE WEIGHTIER**

**MATTERS OF THE LAW:**

**JUSTICE, MERCY, AND FAITH.” (MATTHEW 23:23)**

SO.....LIKE THE ATHENIANS.....MAYBE SOME OF  
US MIGHT BE RELIGIOUS IN EVERY WAY. BUT  
WERE THEY FAITHFUL? ARE WE??

ANOTHER CRITICAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE  
GOSPEL AND THE WORLD IS THE DIFFERENCE  
BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWING;  
BETWEEN KNOWING ABOUT SOMETHING AND  
HAVING FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE.

**ONE OF MY FAVORITE LITTLE SAYINGS GOES  
LIKE THIS:**

**“TELL ME, AND I FORGET;  
TEACH ME, AND I REMEMBER;  
INVOLVE ME, AND I LEARN.” (BENJAMIN  
FRANKLIN)**

**WITH THE TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE TO US  
TODAY, IT’S ALTOGETHER POSSIBLE TO KNOW  
MORE ABOUT JESUS THAN JESUS KNEW ABOUT  
HIMSELF.**

**SERIOUSLY, YOU CAN READ VOLUMES ABOUT EVERY MIRACLE HE PERFORMED AND EVERY WORD HE SAID, BUT THAT'S NOT THE SAME AS KNOWING HIM AS THE LORD OF YOUR LIFE.**

**TO KNOW JESUS AS LORD AND SAVIOR IS TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM. IT'S TO EXPERIENCE HIS PRESENCE THROUGH THE INDWELLING OF HIS HOLY SPIRIT; IT'S TO SEE HIM IN THE FACES OF OTHERS; IT'S TO SPEAK AND ACT IN HIS NAME. IN THE WORDS OF ONE OF MY FAVORITE HYMNS:**

**“I COME TO THE GARDEN ALONE, WHILE THE  
DEW IS STILL ON THE ROSES,  
AND THE VOICE I HEAR FALLING IN MY EAR, THE  
SON OF GOD DISCLOSES.**

**AND HE WALKS WITH ME, AND HE TALKS WITH  
ME,**

**AND HE TELLS ME I AM HIS OWN;  
AND THE JOY WE SHARE AS WE TARRY THERE,  
NONE OTHER HAS EVER KNOWN.”**

**GOD CALLS US, NOT SIMPLY TO KNOW ABOUT  
JESUS, BUT TO KNOW HIM AS THE LORD AND  
SAVIOR OF OUR LIVES.**

**THAT'S THE SECOND CRITICAL DIFFERENCE,  
AND THE THIRD IS THIS: THERE'S A DIFFERENCE  
BETWEEN CURIOSITY AND COMMITMENT.**

**IF THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS WERE ANYTHING,  
THEY WERE CURIOUS. THEY SAID, "MAY WE  
KNOW WHAT THIS NEW TEACHING IS, WHICH IS  
SPOKEN BY YOU?" (ACTS 17:19) GIVEN TIME,  
THEY MIGHT'VE DEVELOPED A WHOLE COURSE  
OF STUDY ABOUT JESUS AND THE ATONING  
NATURE OF HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION.  
BUT THEY WERE UNWILLING TO YIELD TO THE  
AUTHORITY OF HIS GRACE AND LOVE, AND  
THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE.**

**LISTEN: ONLY AS YOU'RE WILLING TO  
SURRENDER YOUR WILL TO GOD'S WILL AND  
FOLLOW THE LEADING OF HIS SPIRIT WILL YOU  
EVER KNOW THE POWER OF HIS GRACE AND  
LOVE.**

**IN MANY WAYS, PAUL LEFT THE AREOPAGUS  
WITH EGG ON HIS FACE. PAUL WAS BRILLIANT --  
---HE WAS PASSIONATE----BUT PERHAPS HE WAS  
NO MATCH FOR THE MIGHTY PHILOSOPHERS OF  
THE DAY..... BUT HE DIDN'T FAIL ENTIRELY, AND  
THAT'S THE THOUGHT I'D LIKE TO LEAVE YOU  
WITH.**

**LUKE SAYS,**

**“(SOME SCOFFED)...BUT CERTAIN MEN JOINED  
WITH HIM, AND BELIEVED,  
AMONG WHOM ALSO WAS DIONYSIUS THE  
AREOPAGITE,  
AND A WOMAN NAMED DAMARIS,  
AND OTHERS WITH THEM.” (ACTS 17:34)**

**TO BE GENEROUS, LET’S SAY PAUL CONVINCED  
A HALF-DOZEN LISTENERS THAT DAY THAT  
JESUS WAS THE CHRIST. SOME WOULD SAY TO  
THAT: “BIG DEAL” .....OTHERS MIGHT SAY “SO  
WHAT” OR “WHO CARES”**

**YET, HERE'S THE SIGNIFICANCE: DIONYSIUS HAPPENED TO BE ONE OF THE MOST REVERED MEN OF ATHENS. HE HAD A HOME ON THE AREOPAGUS! AND SO, AFTER PAUL LEFT AND WENT ON TO CORINTH, IT WAS DIONYSIUS WHO TOOK PAUL'S MESSAGE AND, IN TIME, BROUGHT THE WHOLE CITY TO FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST. A PLAQUE STANDING ON THE AREOPAGUS TODAY READS:**

**“SOME TIME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FIRST CENTURY, A.C., THE APOSTLE PAUL IS SAID TO HAVE CONVERTED A NUMBER OF ATHENIANS BY TEACHING THE TENETS OF A NEW RELIGION FROM THE SUMMIT OF THE HILL.**

AMONG THE CONVERTS WAS DIONYSIUS, THE PATRON SAINT OF THE CITY OF ATHENS, WHO, ACCORDING TO TRADITION, WAS THE CITY'S FIRST BISHOP. REMAINS OF A CHURCH IN HIS HONOR ARE PRESERVED ON THE NORTHERN SLOPE OF THE HILL.”

PAUL DARED TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IN OPPOSITION TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD AND, AT LEAST ON THAT DAY, YOU'D THINK HE FAILED. BUT HE DIDN'T. HE PLANTED SEEDS THAT CONTINUE TO GROW AND BEAR FRUIT, TO THIS DAY.

AND THIS IS WHAT I HOPE YOU'LL TAKE WITH YOU FROM THIS SERMON: THERE ARE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD AND THE TRUTH OF JESUS CHRIST, AND WHEN YOU RECOGNIZE THOSE DIFFERENCES AND CONSCIOUSLY CHOOSE TO WALK BY FAITH, GOD WILL NOT ONLY BLESS YOU, HE'LL USE YOU TO BRING OTHERS INTO A SAVING RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS SON, OUR LORD, JESUS CHRIST.