

“CHRISTIAN IN A NON-CHRISTIAN CULTURE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Acts 17:16-21

Prayer: Holy Father, I preach as one beggar telling other beggars where the bread is. I preach as one sinner telling other sinners where forgiveness and salvation can be found. I preach as a dying man to dying men where the hope of eternal life is. In your grace and mercy, by the power of your Holy Spirit speak through your Holy Word now, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Introduction:

This morning I want us to consider three points from our text.

What did Paul see in Athens?

What did Paul feel in Athens?

What did Paul do in Athens?

What did Paul see in Athens?

Paul saw a city like no other. Athens was a world famous city. It is one of the oldest cities in the world and the oldest city in Europe, over three thousand years old.

It is the largest city in Greece and the capital of Greece.

Athens was a great center of learning, a university city, filled with intellectuals like Harvard. The people of Athens were the most learned, the most civilized, the most artistic and cultured.

Athens is called the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of democracy with great contributions in law, government and political organization. From Athens came major advances in philosophy, science, mathematics, engineering, literature and the arts. We even owe our great love of sports to Athens. The first modern Olympic games were held at Athens in 1896.

Paul saw a city of many great philosophers and philosophies. It was the city of Plato, Socrates, Pericles, Demosthenes, Sophocles, Euripides, Thucydides.

But Paul saw beyond the fame and the glory, the impressive history and heritage. Most of all he saw a city in the bondage of idolatry. He saw a city with a Parthenon full of gods and goddesses, a city of great idolatry. It is said there were more statues of gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece. It was easier to meet a god than it was to meet a person. He saw a city awash in idolatry and consumed by it.

Temples of idol gods and goddesses were on every street corner. A forty foot statue of Athena towered over the Acropolis.

Remember these were not ignorant people, they were educated, learned, scholarly. They knew logic, ethics, history, poetry, and philosophy. But all of that didn't keep them from the utter folly of idolatry, it didn't save them from superstition.

What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, to know all the world has to offer, to be educated and smart, but lose your soul?

This is what happens in a culture where there is no revelation of God, no knowledge of the truth. Without such a revelation, the human heart will bow down to every god of its own making. Without the Word of God and the knowledge of Jesus all other knowledge is worthless.

We live in a culture that trusts in knowledge, education, democracy and capitalism, in the stock market and technology and progress.

But reason without revelation is hopeless to save us.
Knowledge without divine wisdom does our eternal souls no good.

How was it that Paul saw all the idols and no one else did?

When you live in an idolatrous culture you quickly lose your ability to see idols.

An idolatrous culture is like what water is to a fish. It is what's all around us all the time, it is the air we breathe, it is the views, ideas, opinions, ideologies we hear and share. It is so pervasive we aren't often really aware of it.

If you ask a fish what water is, it is a safe bet to say it doesn't know. Fish don't know they are wet. Our culture is our water, our ocean. We are immersed in our ways of thinking and ordering our lives and making our judgments. We don't know our own environment, our own atmosphere. It is so normal, we take it for granted.

Our culture influences how we think, what we like, lifestyle choices, art, music, entertainment, how we do family life, how we do government and business, what we value, how we think about gender, how we define good and bad, right and wrong, and a million other details.

There are huge cultural influencers in our culture. It used to be the home and the church were the driving influencers. Now it is Washington DC, Hollywood, news media, educational institutions, Facebook, Google, Amazon, YouTube.

Whether it's wealth, fame, power, athletes, entertainers, or politicians, contemporary idols abound. Satan seeks to lure us away from our Savior to the false worship of idols.

Epicureans and Stoics are still with us.

Epicureans followed the teaching of Epicurus about 300 years before. They believed there were gods but they were distant, absent, uninvolved and uncaring. There was no life after death, so they lived for pleasure, that was their chief end of man. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die. Epicureans are alive and well today. People who live for pleasure, doing whatever feels good, living for the weekend, consuming entertainment, indulging the appetites, doing what they want. To them God is distant, absent, he doesn't care.

Beware of people who live for the pleasures of the flesh, and more importantly beware of your own bent to live for the pleasures of the flesh. People who live for the pleasures of the flesh have put their hope in this world.

Do you know how you can tell when the idol of pleasure has a hook in you? Any time we are denied pleasure in this life, and we complain, grumble, feel pity for ourselves. Because the world can't truly deliver lasting pleasure, it robs us of our happiness.

Don't let Satan and the fleeting pleasures of this world and this life rob you of the joy that ours by living by faith.

Stoics followed the teachings of Zeno about 300 years before. They believed everything was god and god was in everything. Nature was god. They were the environmentalist, the environment was their religion. The fish is god, the wolf is god. Live in harmony with Mother Nature, hug the trees.

Today pleasure and nature are still in our pantheon of idols. We need eyes to see the idols we value more than God.

What did Paul feel in Athens?

What effect did all of this have on Paul?

An artist in Athens would have been enthralled by the beauty.

A statesman would have been in awe of the political order.

A philosopher would have been overwhelmed by the teachings he heard expounded.

A businessman would have been thrilled by the thriving business district and harbor and merchandise.

There is something awe inspiring about a great city. How many of us have looked up in awe at the architecture and incredible feats of human ingenuity and engineering in some of the greatest cities of the world, Athens, Rome, Paris, New York City, and Chicago. I notice it every time I drive down I-5 into Seattle, the Emerald city, there is a beauty, a power, something impressive about it. And of course those two huge temples to the sports gods, Safeco Field and T-Mobile Park.

Why was Paul provoked? Because he had had a life transforming encounter with the living Christ, he had seen the spiritual condition of his own soul and now he saw everything through the lens of eternity.

When Paul looked on Athens he was stirred to the depths of his soul.

He was stirred with a holy indignation at the power of the devil and his grip on the souls of men. He was stirred with a profound sadness over the countless thousands who would perish without knowledge of God and of their Savior Jesus Christ.

He was most provoked over the offense of idolatry and the rejection of the holy God, worshipping the creature rather than the Creator.

He was stirred with a compassion for the lost and a burning zeal for making Jesus known.

Do we feel genuine sorrow over the sin in our own hearts and genuine sorrow over the sins of others?

II Peter 2:7b-8 ... Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked 8 (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard).

Psalm 119:136 My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.

Ezekiel 9:4 The Lord said to him, “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.”

Luke 19:41 When Jesus looked on Jerusalem He wept.

It is a scary thing when we become so jaded or numb or insensitive that we can look on sin and not feel sorrow, remorse, even a holy hatred. Those who have the Holy Spirit must not fall into apathy and indifference.

Are we provoked? Be provoked.

What provokes us? What gets under our skin?

Do we love the honor of God so much that contempt for God stirs a response in us? Are we provoked by the abuses against God in our culture, how He is trampled on, blasphemed, His commands broken with impunity? Are we more upset by what is done to our freedoms and rights by our government than we are to what is done to our Heavenly Father?

What is it that offends us, offends our sensitivities, angers us, gets us upset? And how has that changed in us over the years? How have our sensitivities been worn down, how have we become increasingly numb to the moral decline in our culture?

What do we listen to or watch now that we wouldn't have a decade ago? Fornication, adultery, pornography, living together. Do we have a strong reaction to God's beautiful gift of married love being turned ugly by putting it on public display? Have we become so jaded we just watch in silent assent to what God hates? If we truly love the honor of God we would honor the gift of sex by never watching any act of it.

Who is provoked in their soul over the slaughter of innocent children in the womb, and the slaughter of children's innocence on the internet and in movies? Who is provoked over the slander of God's name and God's Son and God's church?

Do we silently accept it when husbands and fathers are portrayed in print and film as bumbling fools or arrogant tyrants, when wives and mothers are portrayed as unworthy goals for girls? Do we sit in silence when evil is called good and good is called evil?

When we walk the streets of our own community, of our cities, when we hear the news reports from the cities around our country may our hearts be stirred, provoked, angered over the works of the devil and pray for a greater work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

May we feel something for the lost souls around us. Pray that God will add to His church those who are being saved.

What did Paul do in Athens?

He could have said he was only one man among millions, what can he do?
He could have said he was a stranger in a strange land and it wasn't his business.
He could have said he was weary of the conflict he faced in every city, he needed a break.

He could have said that all these people are way smarter and way more educated than him.

He didn't do nothing. He did not stand still. Paul did something. He thought these are precious perishing souls, time is short, I have received so much grace and mercy myself, so how can I hold my peace.

He reasoned with the Jews and the God-fearers in the synagogue.
He debated with those in the marketplace, in the normal activities of the day.
He conversed with the Epicureans and Stoics.

With holy boldness he spoke up in words so simple they were summarized by Luke with five words. Paul preached Jesus and the resurrection.

That is the beautiful summary of our Christian faith and the Gospel.

A few days after this Paul will go to Corinth where he later wrote to them saying:

I Corinthians 2:1-2 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

What does that simple summary mean? What is included in that statement?

That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that as God He became man, took on flesh to become one of us so what He could live a sinless life and save sinners.

That Jesus died on a cross, an innocent sacrifice, a vicarious satisfaction for sin and a substitution as the just for the unjust, the godly for the ungodly.

That Jesus by His resurrection gained for us complete victory over sin, Satan, death and hell, and holds out forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, and the hope to eternal life to all who repent and believe in Him.

That's simple enough any of us can do it, can share it.

Don't underestimate the power of the simple Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was one man against thousands, a simple message against the greatest philosophies of man. He bore testimony to the greatest miracle ever done on earth, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Paul lit one candle and it has never gone out. The Stoics and the Epicureans are gone, the Parthenon is empty, the idols toppled, but the Gospel continues to bear fruit.

Conclusion and applications.

What do you see, what do your eyes take in? May you have the eyes of Paul, the eyes of Jesus and see what He sees.

What do you feel when you see what your eyes see?

May you feel gratitude for what you have been told and what you believe, the great gift you have been given, the grace and mercy you have been shown. May you feel holy indignation for how our culture treats our God and Savior. And may you feel compassion for those who are still blind to their sin and their need for a Savior.

Recently an appeal was made to this congregation to help support the distribution of Bibles to the Hausa people in Northern Nigeria and you responded very generously, \$4,300. Glory to God.

May our hearts be inclined toward all efforts made to share the good news of Jesus Christ whether here in our own county or country or world. May we read the missionary reports we receive and pray for them. Did you notice the two prayer opportunities this week listed in the bulletin announcements?

What will you do? Where can you take a stand, where can you bear witness to the truth, where can you root out what is impure, unholy, ungodly?

Where can you be unashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes? (Romans 1:16).

In the last six to eight weeks I have conversations with five members of our flock who been led by the Holy Spirit to use their gifts, talents abilities to do something more, by way of action or boldness or prayer.

Be available to God for whatever opportunity He might bring into your life to share the truth, to knock down an idol in your life or someone else's.

Open your eyes to see more.

Open your hearts to feel more.

Open yourselves up to do something more, something worthy of the faith we believe.

Prayer: Holy Father, as you send us out into our Athens, make us instruments in your hands for doing your will. Lift our eyes off of ourselves. Enable us to see the needs around us, to feel what you feel for the lost. Show each of us what you have created and redeemed us to do for the glory of our risen Savior Jesus Christ.