

Easter 6A: May 14, 2023

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:7-18

I Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Every Sunday I sit in my prayer desk facing the large stained-glass window of Mary with the infant Christ—holding him up and presenting him to us; and the little child has his arms stretched out to us. And I'm left wondering how do I cradle and present Christ to the world? Along that line, let me ask you, why are you a Christian? Could you answer that if challenged? What would be your response? Are you ready? Hang on to that thought for a moment.

I'd like to start with talking about the lesson from Acts. This part of Acts is taken from the middle of Paul's second of three missionary journeys. He traveled the known world: Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, and finally Rome. You can see a map of his journeys in the sheet included with your bulletin.

In today's reading he was in Athens. Paul established Christian communities through his traveling and preaching, usually starting in synagogues, because, of course, in the early days, Christianity was a movement within Judaism. But today's reading is different. Today he was in Athens preaching to Greeks who were not Jews. Athens was known for its intellectual and religious importance and the Athenians prided themselves on it.

I'm going to read the beginning of this chapter to give you a bit more context for the scene.

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. ¹⁸ Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, “What would this babbler say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you present? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”

They took him to the Areopagus to let the council hear him---likely the council charged with examining philosophers and religious teachers. This would have been a chance to hear and question him, with courtesy, since Paul was a Roman Citizen and because Judaism was a recognized religion of Rome. They heard him speak of this Jesus, and he would have used the word ‘Anastasis’, which means ‘resurrection’, but since Anastasis is a feminine word, they might have thought this was new goddess.

Athens was the seat of great learning and wisdom from two philosophical schools mentioned in the passage I just read: Stoicism and Epicureanism. Stoicism teaches the development of self-control and fortitude as a means of overcoming destructive emotions, the philosophy holds that becoming a clear and unbiased thinker allows one to understand the universal reason, or what they called, the ‘logos’. Here you can see the influence of Greek thought on John’s gospel, where he starts his gospel with—“In the beginning was the Word”, i.e., in Greek the ‘logos’.

Epicureanism is a philosophy based upon the teachings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, founded around 307 BC. Epicurus believed that what he called "pleasure" was the greatest good, but that the way to attain such pleasure was to live modestly, to gain knowledge of the workings of the world, and to limit one's desires. This would lead one to attain a state of tranquility and freedom from fear as well as an absence of bodily pain. Students of Buddhism will note some similarities here. The combination of these two states constitutes happiness in its highest form. Although Epicureanism declares pleasure to be its goal, the concept that the absence of pain and fear constitutes the greatest pleasure, and its advocacy of a simple life, make it very different from "hedonism" as Epicureanism it is generally understood.

In his address Paul first attempts to flatter, then to reason with them. Versus 24-26 are something similar to stoic and epicurean philosophy. "In Him we live and move and have our being"—is actually a line from the Greek poet Epimenides. And "indeed we are his offspring" is from the *Phaenomena* by the Greek poet, Aratus.

So what good was this flattery and reason? Not much! He didn't convince them and after this there was no further mention of a church in Athens. Some commentators argue that Paul tried too hard to meet them where they were, but really got nothing for it. He definitely adapted his message to his audience, but in the end, they just mocked him.

So, on to my earlier question: Why are you a Christian?, and, Can you answer for your faith if questioned? Too many times I've experienced the same thing as Paul—trying to reason with people who just can't hear, and me trying to be too clever. And so, maybe better advice from our reading in 1 Peter: "always be ready to give a defense [of your faith], but with reverence and gentleness....and a clear conscience." The warning here is that words can help, but how

we conduct ourselves will be the ultimate witness to Christ that resonates for most, even if it means suffering like Christ.

But we are not alone! John's gospel reminds us that we have been given the gift of the Paraclete, Counselor, Comforter (KJV), the Holy Spirit—who will not leave us orphaned! And, as the gospel says, the gift of the Holy Spirit is in us just as Jesus is in Abba God, and he is in us and we in him. Sometimes we don't 'feel' it, and we might be caught spiritually whimpering, but this is when we must have the courage and practice to just be obedient to Christ's way, as in the last three promises in our Baptismal covenant in the Prayer Book: "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?", "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?", and, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" The response to each of these questions is, "I will, with God's help." [BCP, p. 305]

What gives us the courage and perseverance to be obedient to these baptismal promises is our spiritual practice and devotion that nurtures us and opens us to the power of the Spirit. Then, when asked, the 'defense of our faith' is more than some argumentative reasoning, it is the Spirit speaking through us as we live out our faith in 'gentleness and reverence'. When we have the joyful discipline of our daily devotion and connection to Christ, we will be even better able to live out our faith and, like Mary, present the living Christ to our hurting world.