

Scripture Readings and Sermon

May 17, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Acts 17:22-31 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Paul's speech to the Athenians is best understood with in the context of its location. Areopagus is also known as the hill of Mars or Ares (Mars Hill). Mars Hill was a rocky height in Athens, opposite the western end of the Acropolis, where the Athenian supreme tribunal and court of morals was held. It was near this site that Plato (425-347 B.C.) saw his mentor Socrates sentenced to death for impiety or "asebeia" defined as "not believing in the gods of the state" in 399 B.C. In Biblical history, this occurred roughly forty-five years after Nehemiah returned to rebuild Jerusalem. While Plato was not accused of impiety, his philosophy would gradually replace the mythology of the Greek gods. Philo of Alexandria (20 BC to 50 CE), a contemporary of Jesus and Paul and a Jew living in Egypt, reinterpreted Hebrew Scriptures through the eyes of Plato's philosophy. Using the theological concepts developed by Philo, Paul spoke at Mars Hill from which both the Academy Plato (representing Greek philosophy) and the Acropolis (representing Greek mythology) could be seen. At first Paul's argument appears very Platonic arguing against the mythology of the past (24-29). Then Paul turns his back on abstract philosophy by stating that God placed the judgment of the world in the hands of "a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." This man is not a hero or demi-god from Greek mythology but is the manifestation of the divine Logos or Word (a concept from Plato). In Jesus, the "ignorant" teachings of both mythology and philosophy have their truest form.

Commentary on 1 Peter 3:13-17 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

The original lectionary text for this Sunday continues on to verse 22. A decision was made to shorten the reading due to the fact that Peter is repeating his theme of Christ's redemptive suffering introduced in 1 Peter 2:19-25 which was read two weeks earlier. Peter continues with the fact that good people suffer. This suffering, however, is not a sign of displeasure or the absence of God's grace. Instead, Peter says that "you are blessed". This blessing occurs because our faith is in Jesus and so we "do not fear what they fear". Instead, Peter calls the believer to witness to this faith and hope "with gentleness and reverence". Suffering occurs. The question is not why do good people suffer for Christ suffered but rather how suffering can be turned into an act of faith, hope, and love.

Commentary on John 14:15-21 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

In preparation for Ascension Sunday (May 24) and Pentecost (May 31), the lectionary focuses on the promise of the Holy Spirit. After answering Philip's question concerning the Father, Jesus returns to his main point stated in 13:34-35, the new commandment to love one another. The Gospel of John has been building to this point. In Chapter 3, Jesus states clearly that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. The will of God, the Father, is love revealed in Jesus. Jesus is in turn known to the world because of the love of His disciples. While we can not properly love as we ought, the Father will send His love as the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit. It is through this Spirit, that the love of God in Jesus will become manifest in the lives of the believers. The love of the Father is in the Son. The love of the Son is in the Spirit. The love of the Spirit is in the believer. This love, however, is not one way but flows back and forth as a living presence. Jesus therefore says, "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." If Jesus is the Truth then the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth which lives in the believer. If Jesus is the only mediator and advocate then the Spirit is the Advocate which intercedes on behalf of the believer.

Sermon "Witnessing to the Holy Spirit" (*Sermon Video*)

9/11, 2008 recession, Hurricane Harvey, and the pandemic of 2020 are just recent examples of an age old truth. No matter how developed the country or advanced the technology, we are not in control. In the ancient world, mythology was used to explain the random nature of events from earthquakes to wars. To appease the "gods", entire religious systems were developed include temples and statues. As science and reason began to develop, individuals like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle began to use philosophy to provide "logical" explanations for the randomness of life. The sense of control moved for "fate" (a mythological concept) to free will and consequences. No where do these two ideas of control come together better than in Athens, Greece during the time of Paul.

When Paul preached his sermon recorded in Acts 17, he could easily see from his location both the Parthenon (pinnacle of Greek mythology) and Plato's Academy (height of Greek philosophy). Paul acknowledges both of these and then presents a third option, Christianity. Christianity acknowledges that ultimately God is in control and that in God everything exists. The free will act of faith, however, is also key to Christian theology. In Christ, God gives places control of humanities future in the hands of humanity. People can no longer blame a capricious god or a broken covenant for their failed relationship with God. In Jesus, God reaches out a hand of grace and peace to bridge the broken relationship but God does not force humanity to accept this gift. God has given the control of the relationship to each individual to accept or reject this offer of reconciliation. Paul makes it clear that each person will be judged on their response to this offer.

How exactly do we respond to this offer - in love by faith. When we accept God's offer in Christ Jesus by faith, we acknowledge that only God has the power or right to restore the relationship that our behavior broke. In acknowledgment of this inability on our part, God not only came to show us the way in Jesus but also sends the Holy Spirit to both advocate for us and daily guide us back to who God made us to be. It is because of the power of love given through the Holy Spirit that we are able to follow Jesus' commandment to love. Like a stove that gives off heat, we are not the source of the heat but rather it is the power of God's grace in the Holy Spirit that is the source. The heat of this love does not simply transform our lives but the lives of all those we encounter. Like any stove, however, we must first allow the heat to warm our hearts before we can radiate that heat to others. We must first accept God's love of us and learn how to truly and appropriate love ourselves as children of God before we can love others. At times, this love is easy but at other times such as during suffering it is difficult to experience that love.

During the persecution of the early Christians, many found it hard to love others when they were suffering unjustly. Peter understands this but encourages them and us to find the source of our faith, hope, and love even in the midst of suffering. It is precisely during times of suffering that people need to know that there is hope and love. They need the people of God to witness to the source of their faith with gentleness and grace. It is during times of chaos that the world needs the calming breath of the Holy Spirit to bring comfort and assurance. During hurricanes, war, economic uncertainty, and pandemics, people need to know that God is not only in control but that in the end it will be alright and if it is not alright then it is not the end. The world needs the people of God to proclaim that in God we live, move and have our being. The world needs Holy Spirit to shine forth not in institutions but in the lives of the people of faith. Will you witness to your hope? Will you proclaim the "unknown god" to people who are desperately seeking to be spiritual but not religious? Will you love others as Jesus has loved you?