

## Dime-A-Dozen gods and Discount Religion

June 5, 2011

Acts 17:22-31

Sven and Ole were caretakers for the Lutheran church on the corner by the bridge at the river near the edge of town. Sven was tending the flowers and Ole was trimming the hedge on a Saturday morning. Sven had just put up a sign that said, "The end is near. Turn around before it is too late." A car came by, slowed down for a moment as the driver read the sign and then yelled out the window, "You crazy, religious nuts!" Then the car sped up. Moments later they heard the screech of brakes and a big splash. Ole looked up from the flower bed and said to Sven, "I told you the sign should say, 'Bridge out.'"

The Apostle Paul goes to Athens, the bright shining city of classical Greek culture, democracy and the rule of law. Even though Athens was a part of the Roman Empire in Paul's day, the city stood for learning, wisdom and the Greek philosophical traditions of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Athens was the Western world's greatest university town, a place that attracted students from all over the world. Athens was a city of many gods. It was said that there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together, and that in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a fellow human being. It was ground zero of the pagan world.

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus there in Athens, Luke says. This was a place also known as Mars Hill. It stood a rocky 377 feet high, just northwest of the Acropolis. The Areopagus also was a ruling council, a kind of supreme court and governing authority of leading men of Athens. Paul addresses these exclusive, intellectual, elite aristocrats on this holy hill dedicated to the god of war. The council may have summoned Paul to appear before them in some kind of hearing. Perhaps they wished to learn whether this new foreign god Paul was rumored to represent was something to further enhance their already bountiful buffet of religious offerings. Perhaps the generous Mars Hill pantheon of gods and smorgasbord of religion could be made even better.

Paul says to the council, "Men of Athens, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Perhaps the apostle said this tongue in cheek, making a small joke. Perhaps he was being complimentary in a crafty way, or even a bit sarcastic. But we know for sure that he was not directly taking on any of the many gods already represented on Mars Hill. He was not challenging anyone's alternative religion, although you would be right to expect that he might. After all, Paul as Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee of Pharisees, a zealous enforcer of the Law of Moses, the Law that began with the commandments ruling out all gods but Yahweh, God of Israel, and forbidding graven images of any kind. Paul did not

jump right up and say that his Jesus was better than their Mars (god of war) or Venus (goddess of love) or any other gods. Rather, he zeroed in on a weak place, an opening of spiritual vulnerability, their “altar to an unknown god.”

Commentator William Barclay says, “There were in fact many altars to unknown gods in Athens. Six hundred years before [Paul] a terrible pestilence had fallen on the city. Nothing could halt it. A Cretan poet, Epimenides, had come forward with a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose through the city from the Areopagus. Wherever each lay down it was sacrificed to the nearest god; and if a sheep lay down near the shrine of no known god, it was sacrificed to ‘The Unknown God’. Athens had its regiment of unknown gods [and its corresponding regime of spiritual practices honoring these gods]. From that Paul takes his starting point.”

What therefore you worship as unknown, Paul says, this I proclaim to you... He goes on to say that their unknown god is, in fact, knowable and has a name. Their vague god in general is the quite particular God who has been revealed in the crucified and risen Christ. Their unknown, fill in the blanks god is worthy of our worship and need not remain unknown. Look, Paul says, I know him because he first knew me. I know only because I am already known. God in Christ has saved me. I want you to know this God, too. This deity formerly known as the unknown already knows you and loves you. Jesus is Lord. Not Mars. Not Venus. Not Caesar. Jesus.

What a peculiar but winsome approach to sharing our faith! I see how extremely religious you are in every way... What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you...

We do not know for sure if Paul was successful in his trip to Athens. He seems to have written no letters to Athenians the way he did to Corinthians, Thessalonians, Ephesians and other Greek places to which he traveled as a missionary. Barclay says that Paul seemed to have had less success in Athens than anywhere else. “It was typical of the Athenians that all they wanted was to talk. They did not want action; they did not even particularly want conclusions. All they wanted was mental acrobatics and the stimulus of a mental hike. They were lost in words.”

A week ago right now I was in Old South Church in Boston. It is a cavernous old stone place, now surrounded with scaffolding. A nearby subway station was digging to install an elevator for handicap access, and it caused a massive wall with its stained glass window to buckle and begin to fall. Old South Church is actually new Old South, the Old South Meeting House being their first building, the place that inspired the Boston Tea Party and revolution. The newer old South Church is about the age of this place. It and the nearby Trinity Episcopal church were built in the nineteenth century in Boston’s Back

Bay, on fill land that was originally a tidal mud flat. The massive stone Trinity rests on 4,500 wooden piles, each one pounded through 30 feet of gravel fill, silt and clay. A pumping system ensures that the wooden piles remain under water, for they would rot if exposed to air for extended periods. Visits to these two old churches made me think about our own foundations, and what we have built on here at St Paul's. I did a little digging this week and find that even our first log church was built on stone. A good sign. If you walk over to the flag pole, you will see what I am talking about.

Paul at Mars Hill was digging to find a firm footing for the new faith God had sent him to proclaim. He was doing more than offering more words, more ideas, one more god and one more cult. Sometimes I use scripture the way a drunk uses a lamppost, more for support than illumination. I don't want to change. I want justification for who I am and what I do. I want the Word to prop me up just as I am, with all my firmly held convictions, predilections and prejudices. I don't want light to penetrate my dark corners or fresh air to fill the stale air that is best left undisturbed. I don't want to be rattled out any more than the next guy. I can do without a lot of digging and scaffolding!

I would like to be able to say that I am with Paul here, and find the Athenians' religiosity suspect. But I am probably more Athenian than Pauline. I trust in many gods, as most of us do. Mars and Venus, gods of war and love, are always in the top ten. I am a devotee of Pascal's famous wager, that though there may be no god, if I act as though there is, and try to live well and not be too naughty, no harm is done. But if I act as if there is no god and am proven wrong in the end, I am in big, everlasting trouble. God sees how extremely religious I am. I burn my incense at many altars, day to day. I am better at the talk than the walk. I don't want action or change, especially if it involves me in any way. I am not necessarily all that keen on conclusions, just so long as I can keep the questions coming and keep the balls up in the air. Walking through Harvard Yard last week on the day before their commencement ceremonies, I reflected on my own enjoyment of mental acrobatics and hikes, like those of the philosophical Greeks of Athens, Oh, how I miss the ivy covered halls of the academy some days, where life can be lived inside your head instead of in the real world. The human heart is a factory of idols, as John Calvin put it in his commentary on the Psalms. I have built my share of altars to unknown gods. I am extremely religious in an intellectually aloof kind of way.

The perfect scriptural counterpart to the Mars Hill story in Acts is our gospel text from John, where Jesus says to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments... Those who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me."

Being extremely religious in any kind of way misses the point. Jesus did not come to start a new religion. He came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. He came that through Him we might learn to trust God and love as we are loved. There are many gods begging for our attention and our devotion, some known, some unknown. Our time and place is no different from Paul's in Athens in that regard. The Country Buffet and Machine Shed offer way more food than any of us can or should eat. The smorgasbords of spiritual delights are filled to overflowing in our land. The God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth simply knows us and loves us. The God who is in Christ calls us to love as we are loved.

Listen for St Paul the Apostle's voice this week as he says to us as he said to the Athenians long ago on Mars Hill, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."