

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Calling Aloud in the Streets

Acts 17:22-31

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After his conversion to belief and devotion to Christ, Paul travelled all around the known world city to city, region to region, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God, raised from the dead. When he arrived in each city on his missionary journeys, Paul would go first to the synagogue. Jews lived all over the Roman empire and Paul was a Jew, a serious one at that, a Pharisee of Pharisees. So, he went to his people first. He did this in all the towns he visited . . . Ephesus, Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessaloniki... Sometimes his message was received with joy. Sometimes it wasn't. But he knew where to start—with people who at least shared belief in one God, creator whose redemption was promised, and Paul now proclaimed had come in Jesus of Nazareth.

Then Paul comes to Athens. Athens is a different kind of place. And Paul's amazed by it. I'm not saying he was a hayseed come to the Big Apple, but he's never been in a place like this before. By this time, he'd done his fair share of travelling around the cities in his missionary journeys, but this place, this is the wild place. We catch up with Paul walking the streets of Athens taking in the sights. What does he see? The Parthenon was up on the highest point of the city. It had already been there for 500 years by then. But this marvel is not what captures his attention. What captures him is what is right in front of his face, everywhere he walks, statues to idols. Everywhere. He's not impressed. Calvin much later said the human heart is a factory of idols; that may be true, but in Athens was an actual factory for idols, churning out representations in stone and wood of these figures of Athenian fascination.

Willie Jennings describes ancient Israel's understanding of Greek idols as a denial of both God and humanity. Making an idol is making god in my own image, which makes something less than God and denies that I am a creature of the gracious Creator, so I'm something less than human. Idols today come in different shapes and sizes, but what was true about idolatry then is true still now. Jennings writes:

"The idol is a collective self-deception, a point of facilitation where human fantasy and wish, circulating around material realities, generate distorted hope. The idol facilitates a hope of control of both my life and the life of the gods, that is, to draw the gods into common cause with me for sustaining my life. The production of the idol is the production of the human, because through its creation, a self is also created and through its worship and devotion, that same fabricated self is sustained. Idol production is the folly of the Gentiles who know not God or themselves. It is the complete ignorance of the God of Israel, the Creator, and the gracious reality of being creatures." (Acts, 177)

Walking those streets, Paul is not amazed. He's disgusted. This is not the world he knew very well. The world he knew was complicated for sure with competing theologies and philosophies

about life, but at its heart was still a monotheistic world of devotion to one God, whose first command was “you shall have no other gods before me,” and whose second command was “you shall not make graven images” and who, Paul now believed, became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

What do you do when you’re in a situation when you’re a fish out of water, a square peg in a round hole, a man of Jerusalem on the streets of Athens?

The Apostle models for us what it looks like to meet people where they are. You can condemn them or you look for what is redeemable. Anything. This is the remarkable thing about Paul’s visit to Athenians. He doesn’t condemn them in the name of Jesus, the Son of God, but points them toward God’s condescension to them in Jesus. How does this work? It takes some creative compassion and the heart of a teacher. Remember, Paul is the same one who would write “If you have eloquent words of wisdom and knowledge but do not have love, you are a clanging gong, a crashing cymbal.” It must have been through the eyes of love that Paul looked through the streets, searching for something to redeem. This is what love does. Love relentlessly pursues, love endlessly hunts, love searches with passion and doesn’t give up, until there’s something just that one thing in the culture, in the enemy, in the lost child--anything that can bring them home. Love roams not just the streets of ancient Athens, but crooked streets everywhere.

Maybe they will listen, maybe they won’t, but I think this is how good news is good. People have instincts that they are following. They may not know where they should go with them, but if you get beneath the surface of what people are doing to what is motivating them, you discover that people everywhere in all kinds of broken ways, are searching for meaning, happiness, and love. If Paul can reach toward the Athenians, Christian witness can find treasure buried in any field.

To Wall Street, Christian witness says, “I perceive that in every way you are very interested in creating fabulous wealth. Everywhere I look are objects of finance. What you value as important--even worship--this I proclaim to you: something more precious than silver and gold.”

To Bourbon Street, “I see you are pleasure-seeking. Everywhere I look are objects of escape. You desire the joy of living and the delights of this world. You know how to celebrate, but you have forgotten to live in who you are. What you celebrate, even worship, this I proclaim to you: a giver of life and life abundantly.”

To Pennsylvania Avenue, “I see you are very patriotic. Everywhere I look are objects of projected strength. You believe in a nation’s power, and you know the many dangers inside and out that threaten the security and fabric of a people. What you serve, even worship, this I proclaim to you: the way of the reign of God, the prince of peace and of justice for the oppressed.”

To Main Street, “I see you are very responsible. Everywhere I look I see you are just trying to get by, day to day, to make your city a better place and to secure a future for your family. What you serve, even worship, let me show you the one who gives you a future and a hope.”

On every crooked street in the world, the witness of God’s love can ring out. From the Vegas Strip to the Sunset Strip, from Skid Row to the miracle mile and to the road with the house you grew up in but hardly recognize anymore, to the paths your feet will walk through this life... some time you are going to find yourself a long way from home. When you do, remember God already loves this place. God already loves these people. And somewhere underneath what you see, is what God sees. If you can see with God’s eyes, with the eyes of compassion and wisdom, then maybe you can see as God sees.

To Athens, “I see you are very religious. You even have a statue to an unknown God. How interesting. I proclaim to you what you call an unknown god is not a *what* but a *who*. A creator who made the world and all that is in it. A God not made by human hands or consigned to human temples; a God who is the God of this nation and all nations. This is a God who knows each of us intimately and personally, in whom we live and move and have our being. We are God’s children.

“God is not like silver and gold or stone or wood, but a God who calls us to turn our lives around, toward a single man unlike the world has ever known but for whom we have all been waiting. The Word of God made flesh and revealed to us. And God has given assurance to all of this by raising that man from the dead.”

Everywhere you look are idols to unknown gods, but everywhere, God is desperately desired. It is our missionary journey in life, our calling, our joy to say to all who will listen, your life is on bended knee before a god yet unknown, yet let me share with you some good news: God is not a what but a who, and God is nearer now than you know.

Amen.

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