

That Other “Idol” Show

[Text - Acts 17:22-31]

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This past Wednesday, I missed the Season Finale of *American Idol*. Apparently, it's the 13th Season Finale I've missed - in addition to 13 entire seasons. However, to show that I'm not some out-of-touch cave-dwelling troglodyte, this morning I'm going to talk about an earlier “Idol” Show - a *prequel*, if you will. *Athenian Idol* isn't about a singing competition in ancient Greece, though it *is* about a competition. It's about everything in Life that competes for your or my deepest dedication and highest allegiance.

In our New Testament reading, as Saint Paul waits for his colleagues to join him in Athens, he walks around the city and learns some interesting things about its residents. Throughout the city, there are numerous shrines and altars dedicated to a wide variety of rival idols. This may well have been the 1st Idol Competition of record! [Take that Simon Cowell!] And this competition doesn't have smug judges critically putting people down. It has Saint Paul creatively raising people up, and thoughtfully discussing their idols in light of his own theological understanding. Paul had enthusiastically proclaimed the Good News of Jesus throughout Athens: in the synagogue with the Jews; in the marketplace with the merchants; and finally in the Areopagus with the Greek philosophers, which is where today's New Testament reading picks up the story.

The Areopagus is a small rocky hill, northwest of the Acropolis, where the wise and respected thinkers of Athens gather to freely discuss religious, political, and philosophical ideas. [The group gathered, is also called the “Areopagus”.] Since Paul had been proclaiming the message of Jesus throughout the city, he is invited to the Areopagus to speak. This invitation comes, in part,

because the Athenians genuinely enjoy learning about new religions and philosophies. But mainly, Paul is invited because of the way in which he interacts with the people of Athens. He treats them with true courtesy and respect. He is willing to learn from them, as well as share with them his own beliefs. Paul tells them that as he explored their city, he “looked carefully at the objects of their worship,” and he affirms them as being “extremely religious in every way.”

In other words, Paul meets them where they are - acknowledging and honoring their beliefs - and inviting them to open their minds and hearts to an even fuller understanding of the Divine. He proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ with a welcoming spirit of grace; not a harsh tone of judgmental superiority. He finds creative ways to convey his own Faith, without diminishing theirs. His attitude helps them find a common ground, allowing Paul *and* them to draw closer to God, by respectfully connecting with one another as Children of God. Old Saint Paul’s approach can still teach many of us modern-day Christians some valuable lessons about meeting people where they are, and recognizing that *all* faiths have something to contribute to humanity’s fuller understanding of our Divine, Creative Source.

Paul could have belittled the Athenians’ crowd-pleasing, multiple-choice selection of wide-ranging gods and idols. Instead, he asks them about one particular altar that is dedicated “To an unknown god.” Even though this yet-to-be-named god may seem like a handy substitute idol to fill in the gaps where those other gods fall short, Paul uses this idea of that unknown deity as a starting point to share his faith in Jesus Christ. Now, I realize some of you may be thinking, “What does all this ancient superstition have to do with the way in which you and I share our Faith today? It’s not like you can walk down the street and see a wide selection of gods and idols in our modern-day world.” That’s true. Although you can *drive* down the street and see a car that has a Native American

dream-catcher dangling from the rearview mirror, a bobble-head Buddha bouncing on the dashboard, the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the right bumper, and a Star of David on the left, just for good measure!

It seems that in every culture, in every generation, people have an innate desire to search for and encapsulate the Divine. Some express their search in their mobile shrines, while others prefer immovable tablets of stone on courthouse lawns. Some seek to find peace and comfort in the beauty of nature, while others find it within a community of worship. It appears as if it is an integral part of our human nature to search for someone or something in which to believe. Something beyond ourselves, that raises our spirits, gives us hope, and provides us a sense of peace and well-being. As Old Saint Augustine wisely observed, "Our hearts remain restless, until they find their rest in God."

There are numerous things in our world that can compete for our time, attention and devotion; not unlike the many idols scattered throughout Athens. Yet there is only one true and lasting Reality that can give you and me the peace and completeness we so deeply desire - and that is a viable connection with our Ultimate, Originating Source. The remarkable thing we discover in our searching, is that this Divine Source of Life and Love is so much closer than we might imagine.

Paul says to the Athenians, "Indeed, God is not far from each one of us. For as even your own poets have said, 'In God we live and move and have our being' and 'We too are God's offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone - an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals." By citing their own well-known poetic expressions of the Divine, Paul respectfully reminds those Athenians who they are, and *Whose* they are. Paul recognizes that the Divine Presence is everywhere: in poetry and art and

nature; though God is much more than poetry and art and nature. Actually, the Divine Presence is found most fully in every human being, who is made in the Divine Image; who can create poetry and art, and appreciate the beauty of nature; who can care for this world, and show compassion for the people within it. What this says to me, is that if you or I truly want to know or love or serve God, then we must be willing to know and love and serve one another. "For we too, are God's offspring!"

Jesus' self-awareness as a Beloved Child of God, inspires him to welcome and lift-up every other child of God he encounters. His realization that his life is ultimately safe and secure in the loving care of his Heavenly Parent, empowers him to do remarkable things. He challenges the proud and the powerful; he raises-up the lowly and the lost; he touches and transforms all those who are hurting and hungering for purpose and peace. Jesus sets an amazing example of how to live fully and freely. And he shows us that the critical key, is in choosing wisely which god we will follow.

By giving his heart and soul completely to the heart and soul of the Holy One, Jesus demonstrates that the only way to find genuine purpose and peace is by letting go of those lesser gods of power and prestige, fame and fortune, self-importance and self-centeredness. For while there are many things in Life that can compete for our highest allegiance, there is only one sure thing upon which you and I can absolutely depend. And that is the gracious, never-ending Love of our Divine Source. The remarkable thing, is that when you and I let go of those inferior idols, and truly let *God* be our God, we finally find what we've been seeking all along: A purpose and peace that will sustain us throughout our entire lives, and carry us safely forward to whatever lies ahead. These aren't just idle words from an aging troglodyte. These are ageless words that have held true throughout human history.