

An Idol Threat

[Text - Acts 17:22-31]

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When it comes to pop-culture references, I often feel like an out-of-touch cave-dweller. I don't keep-up with the Kardashians; don't know who they are, or why anyone would *want* to keep-up with them. My favorite rapper is probably Glad Plastic Wrap. And I couldn't tell you the difference between *America's Got Talent* and *American Idol*. That said, this morning I am going to talk about an "Idol" competition from centuries ago. *The Athenian Idol* isn't about a singing contest in ancient Greece, though it *is* about a genuine competition! It's basically about everything in Life that can compete for our highest allegiance and our deepest devotion.

In this morning's 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 - making this one of the 1st Idol Competitions of record! And while this phenomenon doesn't have celebrity judges critiquing people's talents, it does have Saint Paul creatively raising people's spirits, and sincerely discussing their idols, in spite of his own life-long belief that idolatry is a cardinal sin. Paul has proclaimed the Good News of Jesus throughout Athens: in the synagogue; in the marketplace; and finally in the Areopagus, which is where our reading picks-up the story.

The Areopagus [or hill of Ares] is a small rocky knoll where the wise and respected thinkers of Athens gather to freely discuss political, religious, and philosophical ideas. Since Paul has been proclaiming the message of Jesus throughout the city, he's invited there 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 has interacted with the people of Athens. He treats them with genuine courtesy and respect. He is willing to learn from them, as well as share with them his own beliefs.

Paul tells them that 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 - honoring their beliefs, and inviting them to open their minds and hearts to a fuller understanding of the Divine. He proclaims the Good News of Jesus with a gracious and welcoming spirit; not a condescending tone of judgment or superiority. He finds creative ways to convey his own Faith, without diminishing theirs.

Paul’s approach can 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 Creative Source. He could have scorned the Athenians’ 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 un-known god might seem like an idol of *convenience* - one that can fill-in the gaps where those other gods fall short - Paul uses this concept of an unknown deity as a starting point to share his own Faith.

Now some of you may be wondering, “What does all this ancient idolitry have to do with the way in which we share our Faith today? It’s not like we walk down the street and see a wide selection of gods or idols in our modern-day world.” That’s true! Although we can *drive* down the street and see a car with a Native American dream-catcher dangling from the rearview mirror, a bobble-head Buddha bouncing on the dashboard, a Jesus bumper-sticker on the left, and a Star of David on the right!

In every culture and generation, people seem to have an innate desire to search for and grasp the Divine. Some express their search in their eclectic mobile shrines, while others prefer immovable stone tablets on courthouse lawns. Some seek peace and comfort in the beauty of nature, while others find it in a community of worship and service. It’s as if there’s this inherent part of our humanity which compels us to search for something or someone in which to believe - something bigger and beyond ourselves, that can elevate our spirits, give us

hope, and provide us a sense of peace and well-being. Saint Augustine put it this way, “Our hearts remain restless, until they find their rest in God.”

There are many things in our world today that can compete for our time and attention, our allegiance and devotion. Yet there is only one true and lasting thing that can give us the peace and wholeness we so deeply desire - and that is a conscious connection with our Divine Source, from whom we all derive. Fortunately, our Divine Source is much closer to us than we might imagine. As 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.’”

By citing the Athenians’ own poetic expressions of the Divine, Paul is able to connect with them, and to remind them of their own innate connection with the Holy One. He recognizes that the Divine Presence is *everywhere*: in poetry and art and nature; though God is much *more* than poetry or art or nature. Paul believes that the Divine Presence is found most fully in human beings, who can create poetry and art, and appreciate the beauty of nature; who can care for this world, and show compassion for its people.

In the person of Jesus, we see a self-aware, fully-loved offspring of the Holy One - one who is Divinely inspired to welcome, embrace and lift-up all of God’s other offspring. Jesus realizes that his own life is ultimately safe and secure in the loving care of his Heavenly Parent; which inspires and empowers him to do amazing things. He challenges the rich and powerful; he raises-up the lowly and the lost; he touches and transforms those who are hurting, and those who hunger for purpose and peace. Jesus offers us a wonderful example of how to live fully and freely. And he shows us that the critical key, is in wisely choosing which “god” we will follow.

The way to find genuine purpose and peace in Life, is by letting-go of those lesser gods of power and prestige, fame and fortune, self-importance and self-centeredness; and by giving ourselves completely to the Divine Source of Love. For while there are many things in this world 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 from whom we all originate. The One who we've been seeking all along. The One who is as close to us as the air we breathe.