

How Can I Keep From Singing?
Acts 17:16-31
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Northminster Presbyterian Church
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It is a bright spring morning, and the Apostle Paul is visiting a new city for the first time. He arrived late the night before, a guest of the biggest church in town because he is Paul after all. And now he begins to explore this new city. As he walks out the front door he sees the sign for the church that is hosting him but his eyes can barely focus because across the street and down a bit to the right, a sign twice as big announces what appears to be another temple, though for the life of him he can't imagine what the theology of a place called Macy's might be. He turns to the left and is confronted by an even bigger edifice that dwarfs the temple where he spent his night. So he decides he must see what this noble looking Temple called 900 North Michigan contains. He finds a space at least four times larger than the enormous Fourth Presbyterian Church filled with tributes to strange gods he's never heard of —Gucci, Bloomingdales, MontBlanc and many others.

He leaves that huge building and continues to explore this ancient city that is new to him and he begins to notice that everywhere he turns there are people wearing symbols that are strange to him. Clearly, there are people here so passionate about their faith that they mark themselves. Who are these strange deities — this Cubs, this White Sox, these Hawks and Bears? And what draws people to them so passionately, he wonders. Then he thinks that he hasn't seen anyone wearing shirts proclaiming their loyalty to Jesus Christ. What an interesting city. And they all seem to be holding a talisman, something so holy it casts a glow upon their faces and places them in a trance so they hardly notice what is around them.

Okay, end of fantasy analogy. Today Paul enters Athens for the first time, the sophisticated (by Jerusalem standards anyway) pastor comes to the big city for the first time and it is amazing. The temple ruins now visited by tens of thousands of tourists are working temples filled with people and spectacle. In the plazas before some of the temples, teachers sit with students reflecting on the issues of the day using the teachings of the great writers and philosophers. In the theaters of the city, artists use satire and

mythology to comment on the Roman Empire so subtly that they can't get arrested.

It is a city teeming with intellectual talk, commerce and an ancient religious tradition that seems to take more from the people than it gives to them. And perhaps Paul can respect that because the religious traditions of his early years failed him as well. Even though he still considers himself a Jew, he's a very different Jew than he was decades before.

And so, like the philosopher he is, he chooses one of these plazas, Mars Hill, the Areopagus. It is a place you can visit even today, a huge rock in the middle of the city, a picture of which is on the cover of your bulletin today. And he begins to speak and it is one of the strangest sermons ever because he does not rail against their pagan ways; he does not preach hellfire and damnation on a heathen people; he says: "You are a very religious people; you are seekers of truth so much so that you have the humility to create a temple to the unknown God, realizing that what you have been taught may not be all there is to know about the world and the divine forces that created and dwell within it. I know the God you don't seem to know and there is much I have to tell you about this God and the One he sent to earth to show us the way to live and to love and to be." In two sentences, Paul covers faith history from creation to Christ, from the first Day to the First born of the dead.

In the midst of a pluralist society, Paul does not condemn all other thought, but he does not water down the gospel as he understands it. Indeed, perhaps it is because he is surrounded by other religious traditions, it forces him to take a deeper look at his own, to see what it is that distinguishes what he believes from what he is seeing and hearing in this city filled with temples to gods he does not know, but who clearly have many followers.

If we give that some thought, I think we can understand what he means. Look around us; look at our world. Yes, we live in a pluralistic society with many religions but we live in a world with much more than that. Paul found all the idols around Athens to be a challenge. Those idols were all to gods. But don't we have idols all around us too? And not just the retail and sports ones I used in my little Michigan avenue fantasy, but many other powerful idols that are a part of our culture. It's not just a Macy's that sits down the street from Fourth Pres, it's one of the tallest buildings in the

world, named after, at least until recently, an insurance company. And the tallest buildings in our city too — who are they named after? Willis Tower, another insurance company, and Aon Tower, yet another insurance company. And then there's Trump Tower. Think about that one, a building constructed by a billionaire tycoon using other people's money that he then named after himself and used that brand to seek political power. Among the other tallest buildings there are two more insurance companies and a bank.

We are surrounded by the idols of our culture, idols to wealth and power, idols to our safety and might. And it's the same in every city. In Houston the three tallest buildings are named for oil companies; in Dallas for banks; in New York — what is the tallest building now — Freedom Tower, a symbol of American might and strength rising from the ashes of the World Trade Center. This is a noble idea to be sure but an Idol to America and American exceptionalism? You bet!

And what is Paul's response to all of this idolatry? It is to tell his truth as he knows it, to proclaim the gospel. And why? Because I think Paul knows that you don't get people to take a look at what you are proposing as a way of life if you start by tearing down the way of life of those you are talking to. But you also don't shy away from your own truth, from speaking truth as you understand it to those who are more powerful or more influential.

Lots of folks today think that we progressive Christians, in our effort to get along with other religions, have watered down the gospel. And they may be right. I can respect other religious traditions. I can even study them for what truths they might contain that can inform my own understanding of God and the world. But surely I, we, should not be afraid to stand on what we believe, to be able to say that our Good News is the truth for us and so it is something we invite others to consider, to see that in Christ there is something unique, something other traditions do not have: God made flesh; forgiveness that is freely given, not bought with a blood sacrifice or an insurance premium or a Black American express card.

Surely the cornerstones of our faith, our creation in the image of God, the world transforming by power of grace, the call to stand with and for the vulnerable and the suffering, the blessing of forgiving and being forgiven, the freedom that comes with being loved just as we are but also being

loved enough to be called to be all that we can be. In our story, in our faith, in our tradition — as messy as it may be sometimes — there is a rock to stand on much greater than the Areopagus. There is a God who is both unknown, because God is so much greater than we could ever know or understand, but then also known, at least in part, because of the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Yes, we in the church have much to apologize for when we engage in the culture, in the historical abuses of power, in the destruction of indigenous cultures almost everywhere we go, in sexual and financial scandals that have rocked the church for at least a couple of thousand years. But we do not need to apologize for the Gospel itself. Indeed, my hope for us is that we would so celebrate our faith — not in a “we’re better than you” way, but in a “this is so amazing I want to share it with you” way — that we cannot help but sing it. As Paul puts it: “In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, ‘We are God’s offspring.’” That is reason enough to rejoice; that is reason enough to sing, not to shout down the songs of other traditions but so that others might see and know and be changed. For our goal in celebrating and sharing our faith is not to convert the stranger but to insure that none consider themselves strangers in our presence, that all find welcome, that all find home perhaps not in our church but in the gracing embrace of God in the centering power of the Holy Spirit, in the world-changing ethic and self-offering of Jesus Christ. This is particularly good news to those who are captivated by the idols of our culture for whom the closest thing to worship each week is the accumulation of things and the adulation of those who have succeeded or made the greatest spectacle of themselves. For these friends our message is not that things are bad, but that things crumble and become obsolete. Love and grace never do.

And so we trust that this transforming understanding of ourselves and our world will be transformative for others. Let our lives and our words sing our faith, our good news, until every voice can join in the song, not all on the same note perhaps, but in a harmony of God’s own composing — a song of hope for all creation, a song of love for all humankind. So, let’s get to singing. Amen.