

# SECTS AND THE City

Sermon, May 29, 2011

Texts: John 14:1-14; Acts 17:22-32; I Peter 3:13-18a

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is preparing His friends for His departure. He tells them not to fear, He is going before them to prepare a place for them. This text has brought great solace and comfort to many who have lost loved ones. It has also brought hope to many who suffer through the hardship of their final days, often with not only debilitating physical circumstances, but also with great pain. To know our Risen Lord has gone before us through the veil of suffering and death and has emerged risen and triumphant on the other side, never to die again, and to hear His promise that He goes before us to assure a place is being prepared there for us ... and to hear Him reiterate, "If it were not so, I would have told you" ... which is another way of saying, "Would I lie to you?" ... these are words that help take away the sting of death and, in its place, give peace. I have read these words at virtually every funeral service I have conducted the last twenty seven years. Knowing these words by heart, now, I more recite than read them, which enables me to sometimes watch the faces of the mourners. As these promises are recited, I've often seen tears give way to hope, I've often seen the pain of loss give way to expectation. I've seen the "aha" recognition that, as attached as we are to this life in all of its goodness, there really is life beyond this shadow we call death. These are wonderfully comforting promises.

While the disciples are trying to take all of this in, Jesus tells them they know the way to the place where He is going. Thomas voices the question everyone is asking: "*Lord, we don't even know where you are going; how can we know the way?*" Jesus responds, "*I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" Note two things: (1) Jesus was directly answering a specific comment made by Thomas ... when Thomas said, "*we don't know the way,*" Jesus responds in so many words, "*Yes you do! You know me. And I am the Way. And I am the Truth, I will not lie to you. And I am the Life, and no one comes to the Father but through Me*" (2) When Jesus says "*no one comes to the Father except through me,*" Jesus is not laying down a condition so much as He is simply stating a fact. Jesus is God in the flesh; He is in the Father and the Father is in Him; to see Him is to see the Father; He and the Father are one. He is *not* saying that unless one believes in Him, unless one understands Jesus as the Christian creeds name Him as Lord and Christ, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made, unless one understands all that AND claims Him as personal savior, then forget it, you'll never come to God. No, Jesus is simply stating the truth about His own nature and being. When He says "*no one comes to the Father except through me,*" that means one thing: it is a statement of fact about His relationship with the Father. They are one, whether you believe that or not. Jesus is God in the flesh. When you come to God, you come to (and through) Jesus. On a related note, the God we worship has the freedom to call whomever He chooses, however He chooses, whenever He chooses, even if they may not know it. Sometimes God speaks to people in surprising ways in order to move them to greater Truth. He starts right where they are in order to bring them where they need to be. For one example, He did it with a group of Persian astrologers called Magi who followed a star to the birthplace of Jesus. Now, the Bible condemns astrology. But God spoke to those astrologers in their language ... in a star ... and brought them to bow before Jesus Christ.

Paul understood this, as demonstrated in our reading from Acts this morning. Paul knew the Bible condemns idolatry, but he was alert to the fact that God wants to connect with the proud intellectuals of Athens as He wants to connect with everyone. If God is God, then it stands to reason He is alive and active throughout His entire creation ... including the Athens where you travel, live and/or work. All He needs are faithful apostles who will help people understand the God who is already there AND interacting with their lives. Pardon the pun, but our reading could be subtitled, "*Sects and the City of Athens.*" Paul found many sects there; there were gods and idols too numerous to count, each having their following of devotees. How do we as Christians deal with sects? (*I know, we're Presbyterians, we don't believe in sects*). What does it mean for us to be faithful to our calling, faithful to who we are, when dealing with people who practice other (or no) religions? How do we deal with people who believe different things than we do about eternal life, about forgiveness, about grace, about heaven? Should we Christians be silent about what we believe in order to peacefully co-exist in a polytheistic (and increasingly atheistic) society? Do we have to downplay what we believe in order to get along with people who do not believe as we do? For that matter, how do we respond to Christians who hold to a radically different form of Christianity than we do, even within our own denomination ... even within our own congregation?

We do live in a diverse age: diverse in politics, in religiosity, in morality, you name it. This is not unlike the environment Paul encountered in Athens. In fact, it is not unlike the world the early Christians encountered just about everywhere they went. As you know, most of the early Christians were Jews first. As the Gospel spread and non-Jews (Gentiles) became believers in Jesus Christ, the question was raised: "*Does a Gentile have to become*

*a Jew first before becoming a Christian?"* Should a Gentile have to first adhere to Jewish food laws and all the Jewish practices in order to become a Christian? That was an a big controversy for the early church in that pluralistic society. One of the earliest councils of the church was centered on this very issue, and they concluded one did not have to become a Jew first. There were also questions regarding pagan religious traditions such as offering sacrifices to the various gods of nature. For example, as a Christian would you accept an invitation to a social gathering in honor of Lord Serapis, the god who produced rainfall and bountiful crops? Would you go to a social gathering where a sacrifice to such a god was going to be made? What if you were a Christian stonemason in Ephesus and you got a contract from your employer to build a temple for the Diana fertility cult, temples which housed priestess prostitutes? You need income, you need to provide for your family, this is your trade ... but should you take that contract and cut the stone for that temple? Such questions are certainly not limited to the first century; we deal with such questions every day as we do our work and go to school and carry out our lives in an increasingly diverse and secular age. How do we as Christians relate in a polytheistic and/or atheistic society? It's hard to give a comprehensive answer; every situation is unique, but I think we can find three bits of wisdom in Paul's Athenian encounter: *Paul chose to (1) wake up, (2) show up and (3) speak up.* Paul could have just kept his eyes shut while traveling through Athens, but he didn't. He opened his eyes to what he was seeing all around him; he did not ignore it. He "woke up" to the reality of the world he encountered. Yes, it bothered him; it would have been easier to just ignore it and move on. But he didn't.

Let me underscore that we have to believe things aren't always as they appear, especially when it comes to matters of religious faith. People are rarely as "dead set" as we think they are. We should know enough about God and His grace to know He will be eminently fair, ultimately just and sovereign, that grace is the business of a God whose ways are not always our ways, and that God is constantly at work everywhere in this world. Again, Paul was awake and alert to the fact that God wants to connect with the intellectuals of Athens as much as He wants to connect with anyone. In this confidence, Paul *shows up* and *speaks up*. He makes two key points in his speech important for us to remember as we relate to the different traditions in our own day.

First, there is the key step of communicating respect. Paul demonstrates understanding that while people may be wrong in what they believe, their *instinct* to worship is still from God. So Paul starts out by connecting where he can. He honors what the people already know and are already seeking; he respectfully acknowledges the seriousness of their religious search. Yes, Paul is bothered by this idolatry; v. 16 tells us he was greatly distressed to see the city so full of idols. Paul grew up knowing the worst judgments Israel faced in its history always came in response to their worshipping idols. But there is more to Paul's response than fear of judgment, there is genuine compassion, and he conveys compassion in his interaction with these folks. He conveys compassion by communicating respect, by honoring the fact that these are real flesh and blood people, people who have loved ones and worries and concerns and valuable traits and things worth praising in their very real lives. He acknowledges the seriousness of their religious search and thus honors their integrity. They *are* very religious; look at how many gods they have! But he doesn't stop there. He goes to the next step: he also helps them come to grips with the reality that their religious search has not brought them final knowledge of the truth.

*"As I walked around I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To An Unknown God.'"* Paul says, "This is the God I want to talk about." Paul goes on to tell them he is there as the representative of this God, the one God who is the God of all people everywhere. This God isn't man made; He is the maker of man. This God gives all people their life and breath and everything else. From one man, Paul says, God made every nation. As God's creation they all already have intrinsic worth. So they shouldn't cheapen their lives with idolatry. Now, note that many of them seem to understand this. Apparently, God has been telling them such things all long, and Paul shows up, speaks up, and helps them to understand this God who is already at work in their lives. Paul is saying that God speaks to all people everywhere to bring them to some level of truth. Paul quotes two Greek poets to prove his point. The first, *"In him we live and move and have our being,"* is from the famous poet Epimenides. The second, *"We are his offspring"* is believed to be from a poem by a poet from Paul's home city of Tarsus. Then he goes on to explain how this God is revealed to us in Jesus, this same Jesus who called Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life, this same Jesus Who stated that He and the Father are one, this same Jesus Who rose from the grave.

Paul sets an example of how we can talk to people about what we believe as Christians in a way that shows respect. Many people around us are dealing with matters of faith. We are to wake up to the realities about us, we are to show up and let our lives and our witness do the talking, and when the time is right we are to speak up and say what we as Christians believe. *"Be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in you,"* Peter encourages. And one thing we do believe is that one Day every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess Jesus Christ is Lord. Because He is God. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life ... all who come to God come to Him. That Day will come.

And in the meantime, we are all called to wake up, to show up and, for Christ's sake, to speak up.