

May 28-29, 2011 (Memorial Day Weekend)

Title: *Paul...Missionaries for Christ (First in the new series)*

Theme: *Paul the apostle, stands before a Greek audience and boldly declares that the "unknown god" they worship can actually be known and this God is the Lord of heaven and earth. As followers of Jesus we are missionaries to all in what we say and do.*

Text: Acts 17: 22-31 (I would suggest going to the end of the chapter, vs. 34)

Notes on the Text

Because this passage picks up Paul as he begins a speech, it would be helpful to give a little context. Paul is on his third missionary journey which begins in Syrian Antioch and ends in Jerusalem...a journey of thousands of difficult miles. Prior to today's text Paul and his colleagues have been attacked and chased out of both Thessalonica and Berea. He is now in Athens. Step into Paul's shoes and you can feel his physical and emotional exhaustion.

Now in Athens Paul is invited to speak at the Areopagus ("Court of Ares") where a Greek leadership council met and representatives of the two primary schools of philosophy (Epicurean and Stoic) would gather to debate (think Starbucks on Harvard's campus). As always, the purpose of Paul's "sermon" is to point people to the Lord.

While the text clearly says that Paul was deeply distressed by all the idols in Athens Paul's address to the Greeks is remarkable not only in its content but also in its tone. For a man who is both stressed and distressed Paul is still deeply focused on the needs of his hearers:

- While Paul abhors idolatry he doesn't condemn the Greeks. Instead Paul uses the common ground of spiritual hunger as a launching point for conversation.
- His preaching is thoroughly contextual. The differences between this speech to the Greeks and his speech to the Jews are profound and profoundly helpful.
- Paul harnesses Greek culture (their poetry) as a connection point.

Beneath the surface of this interaction is a beautiful example of selfless love in action for the sake of the Gospel.

Up to 17:30, Paul does not say anything especially controversial. In fact, his purpose up to that point seems to be establishing a common bridge to his audience. The climactic moment comes then, at his mention of repentance, judgment, and resurrection. At that point the speech is interrupted and the audience divides into those who scoff, those willing to hear more, and those who believe. Why?

By referring to Jesus' resurrection and implying that all people will likewise be raised from the dead, Paul steers the Athenians toward a notion of communing with the Divine that does not square with their presuppositions. To repent means to change one's mind and therefore the direction of one's life. Such a call does not go down easy for people who simply want to bob endlessly in the shallow waters of new and intriguing ideas. But

the real issue (according to vs. 32) seems to be Paul's mention of the resurrection of the dead. To a crowd interested in the immortality of the soul (and an accompanying contempt for bodies and the limitations they impose), Paul preaches about a God who resurrects bodies. It's a difficult thing for the Athenians to hear as good news. Why would people want to keep their bodies? It strikes them as somehow vulgar!

In the end, Paul cannot preach the gospel without making reference to the particularity of Jesus. He roots the significance of Jesus in humanity's yearning for knowledge of the Divine. Jesus fits within basic Greek religious ideas, but he also confounds them. He brings something new, something unfamiliar.

Preaching Possibilities

Because this is the start of the new summer series we'll need to begin with a little introduction to get people excited about where we're going.

Because this series is going to focus on the individuals from the Bible I'll spend some time introducing Paul as a person, telling his story.

Because Planting Seeds is critical at PoP, the "lesson" we'll need to learn from Paul is his missionary heart. Here are a few "take-aways" that I may focus on:

- It begins with "heart". Put another way, it begins with motivation. For Paul the motivation came from his own experience of being set free from the law, being saved by grace through faith. We see his passion and motivation in his response to the idols in Athens. He is "incensed" or "deeply disturbed" by them. For Paul that probably meant that he was offended on God's behalf. This raises questions for us, particularly "what is our motivation for planting seeds?" Are we truly grateful for what has done for us in Christ? Is our heart moved by God's love and grace? Are we "deeply disturbed" by the destruction wrought in our neighbors' lives by the idols in our culture (money, power, etc)?
- Paul went to where people are. He didn't wait until people came the synagogue in order to share the Gospel with them. We, too, are called to "go"...whether it be around the block, around the country or around the world.
- Our witness begins with common ground. For Paul that was intellectual common ground. For us it's relational common ground. Genuine friendship is the solid foundation for faith sharing in culture today.
- Ultimately our witness is to the person of Jesus and what God has done and is doing in the world today. We are people privileged to share Good News.

This will be a great time to point people to the Planting Seeds preaching series and training materials that will be available in January, but it would also be good to have something to point people to now. Ideas??