

St. Luke Ev. Lutheran Church

Sermon by Pastor Anthony L. Schultz

Easter 6 April 27, 2008 Acts 17:22



Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

People of God – rescued from the flaming lake of fire in hell by the innocent blood of the very Lamb of God:

We were at a dinner last week – when someone asked me – “have you read that book by a guy who said he spent 23 minutes in Hell?” I said – “No – I wasn’t familiar with it at all.” What a concept. It is kind of like scared straight. Spend the better part of half an hour in eternal destruction – and you would understand the horror so much – you realize all that matters – all that really matters – is going to heaven – when you die. Do you think about hell? If you think about hell – think about how it must smell. Mommies are blessed by Jesus with a very powerful sense of smell. They can smell a little person’s hands – and smell soap that smells like vanilla with little grits to get your hands germ free. Mommies can give little people a good night kiss – and smell toothpaste – if you really brushed your teeth – not just stuck your tooth brush bristles under the faucet! Mommies can smell perfume that smells like peaches and cream and they can smell sweat and deodorant and aftershave. Imagine if the smell was sulfur – the smell of spoiled and rotten and dead – so thick and terrible it makes your eyes burn and your nose and throat – and there is no escape! Imagine being locked up in a prison – a cell – a cage – and there is no escape! They say almost 10 years ago – Ted Koppel – the news guy with the perfect wavy hair – spent time doing a report on a penitentiary – a maximum security prison. They say one of the things that surprised him most – was the fact that it was so very noisy in the night. That all through the night prisoners would scream – literally scream and cry out – and whine. That it was almost impossible to sleep with all the noise! All of this pales to insignificance – when you stop and think about how unspeakable the horror must be in hell. Human imagination cannot fathom and human words cannot express how unspeakable that hurt must be – to be cut off forever from the goodness and kindness that is God. *God is love*. And to be cut off from that love – must be horrible beyond telling. Today – as we stand beside the Apostle Paul by Mars Hill in Athens – we want to ask the simple question:

Are You Very Religious?

- 1. Remember God made everything**
- 2. Remember God is near everyone.**

Ever since Easter – for some 5 weeks now – we have been reading from the second letter a physician named Luke wrote to his friend Theophilus. We read about how on Pentecost Simon Peter preached a stinging law. That the people who were listening to him were in fact – literally responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. And so am I and so are you! We are responsible – as surely as if we were holding the nails or swinging the hammer. We are to blame! People felt the pain of heart and mind and conscience. And they knew the joy of forgiveness complete and unconditional! Jesus’ forgiving love changed everything. People began to share – to share everything! Here! Have some of my stuff! Jesus is very big on sharing – don’t you know? People began to have meals together! What could be more wonderful than having supper together? And how was your day? People talked about their troubles and problems and other people said, “I didn’t know that! I will pray for you!” People talked about God’s wonderful blessings! People said, “I didn’t know that! I will praise God with you!” People had holy communion all the time – again and again and again and again! It didn’t become common and ordinary and something you took for granted without thinking about it. How could the body and blood of Christ become common and ordinary and something you took for granted? You couldn’t – could you? People read God’s Word! They studied the Scriptures! And they brought Thankofferings! The body of Christ grew – and God was glorified! People became missionaries. You couldn’t keep the Gospel like that to your self!

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus... The Areopagus was at first literally Mars’ Hill. That’s a hill of creamy rock – worn smooth by so many people walking on it. Mars’ Hill is just a little way over from the Parthenon. Just a little way over from the Nike ladies – victory ladies – painted sculptures of ladies – dedicated to Greek mythological heroes who gave military victory to the city state of Athens! The Areopagus became synonymous with the Athens’ Council of Twelve – the wisest men and the highest court in Athens. By the time the Apostle Paul came to Athens – the group didn’t literally meet on the hill – and they weren’t the supreme court of Athens. But the city of Athens remained the place where the idle rich enjoyed discussing new philosophies, new religions and foreign gods. Some of the greatest minds in the whole world – were looking for the answers to the most profound and at the same time most practical questions of all. Questions like – where did this world – the sun, moon, stars – the soil and the sea – the plants and animals and fish and birds and people come from? Why am I here? What is the purpose of life? What is right and what is wrong? What are we to do with hurtful evil – with painful guilt and ultimately with death and the grave? There must be some God! Who is he and what pleases him? What is the meaning of life and death? If you don’t know – how can anything have meaning?

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. The people of Athens knew there must be a God – some God – somewhere – somehow! It made no sense to believe that this world could exist by chance by itself. The Scriptural truth is also the truth of the human experience. **The fool has said in his heart – there is no God!** And again – **Every house is built by someone – but the LORD is the maker of heaven and earth!** The people of Athens knew there must be some God – somewhere. Their conscience told them they were accountable for the things they did that were very obviously painful and hurtful and wrong. The problem with the natural knowledge of God – is that it falls far short of the essential truths of law and gospel in Scripture! The ancient Greeks were fascinated with the ideas of a

man named Epicurus – who died some 270 years before baby Jesus was born. Epicurus said the gods aren't interested in what people do and that there is no life after death – no final day of judgment and reckoning. So all you have is the here and now. All you have is today. So – why not enjoy life – by doing what is wise and right? Think about that! It makes sense! Do what is wise! Eat more fruits and vegetables – more chicken – less red meat – more fresh fish with that Omega-3 stuff. Use olive oil – avoid sodium – drink plenty of water and exercise. Eat heart smart – manage stress – treat your body like a temple! Don't abuse drugs or alcohol! Do what is right. Imagine if everyone told the truth! Imagine what it would be like – if governments told the truth. If people in positions of great public trust – were all trustworthy. Don't take what isn't yours. Don't cheat on your taxes. Don't cheat on your spouse. Don't cheat on your homework or tests. Don't cheat when you play golf. Imagine what a better world this would be if people shared what they had with their own family – their own relatives – much less – shared with their friends and neighbors! Epicurus was a very wise man. But he didn't know the way to heaven. And after a while – his teaching kind of degenerated into a sort of eat, drink and be merry – for tomorrow we die. That's a pretty popular philosophy today, too. There are commercials for riding lawnmowers and weed whackers – with the velvet voices announcer saying – it's time to mow now – and pay later! There is eternal danger to our immortal soul if we think we can do as we please and indulge our self today – and some day tomorrow will never come – when we will have to pay the consequences! Jesus lived a life free from any sin and mistake and died an unimaginable death – for all the times we have indulged ourselves – doing what we found pleasant and pleasurable – without regard for what's right in Jesus' sight. Jesus died for all the times we have been Epicureans!

Jesus also died for all the times we have been followers of a man named Zeno. Zeno died five years before Epicurus. Zeno was a philosopher, too. His disciples were called Stoics. They thought their highest duty and calling was to act reasonably. Their teaching kind of degenerated to the bite the bullet – be tough and learn to take it. Life isn't fair – get used to it. Get a helmet. Life is tough. So when it hurts – rub some dirt on it. When it hurts – walk it off. And remember there's no crying in baseball! So – when the going gets tough – the tough get going. There's plenty of that attitude today, too! If the price of gas keeps going up – get a hybrid car – get a solar powered car – ride a bike – walk – work out of your home. Raise your own vegetables – join a co-op where you can trade what you do for what you need. Sell stuff on E-Bay. Be so creative – you can't be beat down by life. The only problem with that – is – there will be lots of tough and incredibly clever creative people in eternal destruction, too! Only the Gospel can show you the way to Heaven!

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. To some of the smartest people this world has ever seen – Paul taught them the one thing needful – Christ crucified and risen to wash away all our sins. If you were to ask people who is the smartest – most brilliant person alive today – not a few might vote for Stephen Hawking. Mr. Hawking's mom moved from London to Oxford when Stephen was in her tummy – because the German Luftwaffe was bombing London. Stephen didn't get all straight A's when he was in school – but he really loved his math teacher. Stephen grew up to teach theoretical physics. He has

discovered a kind of radiation named after him – discovered all sorts of things about black holes. He has Lou Gherig’s Disease – so he has a wheel chair that has an infra red blink switch in his glasses – so he can control it – with his eyes! Stephen is one of the most clever people in the world. And yet – what he needs to know is that Jesus loves him. That Jesus died on the cross to forgive him. Without the truth of the Gospel – all the worldly wisdom in the world won’t do him any good – when Judgment Day comes. We live in a world where there are all sorts of exceedingly successful people if you measure success in terms of things and stuff. There are people who have their own networks – who can pick a book for their book club and by simply saying that – will guarantee literally millions of copies sold. There are people so rich – some people will do almost anything to become their apprentice! But the simple truth is – you can have your name in solid gold on towers in downtown New York – your name painted on your own plane and helicopter and yacht and more. But if you don’t have Jesus in your heart – what have you got? What can you give in exchange for your soul?

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. There is nothing more precious than Jesus’ forgiving love in your heart. That’s why it’s so important not just to pray all the time. It’s important to come to Church – to worship – to listen to the Scriptures read and applied – to come to Lord’s Supper – to grow in faith. It happens all the time – people have something exceedingly valuable and precious and they are careless with it – and lose it! This week – there was a guy named Paul and his wife Karen. They were on vacation – in a villa in Florida. Karen put her engagement ring, wedding ring and five-year anniversary ring in a cardboard bowl. Paul didn’t see them – and threw them in the trash. It took 8 people in haz-mat gear digging through bag after bag of rotting garbage – to find the rings! How could people treat literal gold and platinum and diamonds so carelessly? How could we treat the very Word of God – and Jesus’ body and blood in Holy Communion thoughtlessly and carelessly? Again – by the grace of God alone – we will treasure the Gospel and treasure every opportunity to hear it!

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. I checked the *Boston Globe Obituaries* again the other day. A lady named Hazel passed away on Monday. Hazel was famous for more than two decades – for her ability to scream. She was a very pretty lady – with red hair and green eyes. She wasn’t really a great actress. She was just incredibly good at *screaming bloody murder*! Hazel liked to say – “Just in case I should pop off to Heaven in the night, I always remember to wash up, punch up the cushions, and straighten up after a dinner party. I wouldn’t want everyone to come in and find it a mess!” I can only imagine the forever screams of pain and sadness and utter despair that must echo through hell. No matter how hard you would clamp your hands over your ears you could not keep out your own cries of hopelessness. It is only by the grace of God – that we know – it doesn’t matter if your bed is unmade – your jammies in a heap on the floor – your sink full of dirty breakfast dishes and soda cans and fast food wrappers on the floor of your car. It doesn’t matter if when we die – no one has dusted or vacuumed or cleaned dried toothpaste from your bathroom sink. All that matters is that Jesus washed away all your sins – so you can stand – unafraid before him – forgiven! Amen!

To God alone all glory!

Rev. Anthony E. Schultz