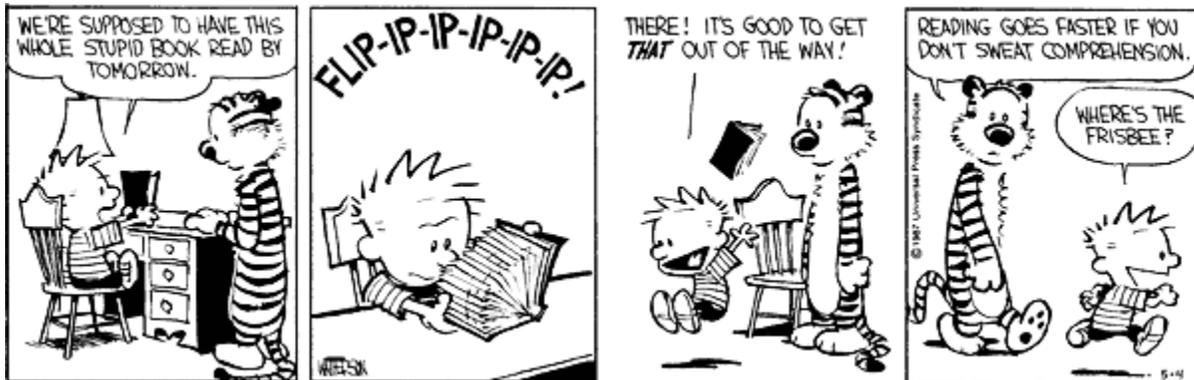


Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon  
"Leaving No Base Uncovered"  
Acts 17:16-34  
May 29, 2011  
Pastor John Guthrie



Unlike Calvin, the philosophers of Athens were never quick to get to the conclusion. They were philosophers, after all. Every issue required lengthy thought, deep cogitation, and vigorous debate. Furthermore, if the answer seemed difficult or unreasonable, the best thing to do was to embrace uncertainty.

Athens had been at the zenith of its classical glory and influence five centuries before Paul came to the city. But even in the time of the New Testament, the city retained its reputation as an intellectual center. Athens had been the home of such cerebral giants as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno. Indeed, Paul debated with followers of Epicurus (called "Epicureans") and followers of Zeno (called "Stoics").

These philosophical schools were not just interested in mind games or rationality. Rather, Hellenistic philosophy was almost religious in nature, concerned with practical living and ethics as well as the way to happiness. Epicureans sought happiness through a focus on the higher sensations of the mind and tried to free themselves of disturbing passion and emotion. They sought to withdraw from the world and take no interest in human affairs.

Stoics believed that the divine was a natural force in nature which had predetermined all things. Thus, happiness involved a fatalistic acceptance of the natural laws and course of events without emotion. They had little interest in moral achievement. Some of these philosophers looked down their noses at Paul, calling him a "babbling" (Acts 17:18). Others concluded that "he seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities" (17:18). In their minds, the gospel of Jesus Christ was interesting as a new intellectual fad and idol to be added to the countless array of gods throughout the city. These pagan Athenian intellectuals, according to Acts, cared more about what was new than what was true (17:21).

One theologian (Sally McFague) has said that all theological words are metaphorical: whenever we speak of God we immediately run up against the limits of human knowledge and perception. So in reality the Athenians are being very prescient: they build a shrine to a god whom they do

not know.

The fact is, of course, that the Athenian philosophers are unwilling to commit themselves to a particular god. In fact, the Greeks understood that there were many gods: Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Athena, Dionysus, Pluto, Hermes, Poseidon, Zeus, and others. The Roman gods were modeled for the most part after these.

We are told that Paul is deeply distressed as he wanders about Athens, noting that the city is filled with idols, that is, statues and shrines to these gods. He also runs across one most unique, inscribed to an “unknown god.” That’s rather odd, don’t you think? If the god is unknown, how does he know that offerings are being made to him or to some other unknown god?

The Athenians are making sure they’ve got all their bases covered, of course. Can’t run the risk of offending the unknown god. Who knows what he might do?! Better to build a shrine to him and make offerings there, just in case. Got to cover all the bases.

Paul boldly preaches Jesus the Messiah in Athens, and the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who meet at the Areopagus take note. Here is something new! They were very used to the idea of gods coming to earth and consorting with human beings. But a god who was crucified, raised and lives? This was unique! They ask Paul to address them about this Jesus.

Paul begins his speech as deftly as any Greek orator. He attempts to establish some common ground. He congratulates the Athenians for at least searching for God. They yearn to find meaning, purpose and structure to life which transcends their individual human lives. Paul models one who does not point fingers in righteous indignation at non-Christian seekers of the truth; Paul seeks to minister to their yearning and searching. Paul notes the shrine he has discovered, dedicated to the unknown god.

And he says this: “The god you worship as unknown is the God who made all that is, the creator of all things, the Lord of heaven and earth, and the One who gives life to all creatures, both human and otherwise. He doesn’t live in shrines and cannot be contained by buildings. He cannot be rendered in silver or gold or wood. And yet, he is not far from any of us. Remember what your own poets have said, “In him we live and move and have our being.” And, “We too are his offspring.” (The first quotation, by the way is from Epimenides of Crete, and the second is from Aratus.)

“But know this,” Paul continues. “This one and only God has previously overlooked human ignorance. But now he commands all people to repent, because a day of judgment is approaching. The judge will be this Jesus Christ, about whom you have heard me preach. And be certain of this: this Jesus is alive.

We read that some of the philosophers were intrigued, wanting to hear more. Some of them ridiculed Paul. And a few of them believed and became Jesus-followers.

The problem with Paul’s sermon is that it is centered in the belief that the God of Jesus Christ is the one and only true God. The Athenians think that statement is scandalous. Some people who love the idea of religion draw the line precisely where Paul’s audience draws the line. The idea that the God revealed in Christ is the one true God is offensive.

Tolerance is considered a primary virtue today. When faced with a world filled with religions, a

lot of people respond: "We're all headed to the same place. When you come right down to it, all religions are saying the same thing. They're just different paths to the same place." If all religions are the same, then there is no need to choose. It's increasingly acceptable to say that truth is relative and everything is personal opinion.

But those who think that all religions are simply different paths to the same place end up selling every religion short. If you look closely at the variety of major world religions you find that they're not all saying the same thing. Religious indifference is an offense to all religions. In discouraging critical evaluation of beliefs and practices, toleration also discourages commitment to what is true. And that's the real problem. All religions make statements about what is true. Their statements are not the same, and they often cannot be reconciled. Is there, then, no such thing as religious truth? The many writers of our Bible certainly thought there was.

No other religion teaches that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Anointed One, the Messiah of God, that he was raised from the dead by the power of his Father, and now rules and reigns alongside his Father. Furthermore, central Christian doctrine embraces his return and the completion of the Kingdom of Heaven here on the earth. Over the past few weeks I have tried to establish that these beliefs, although counter to our post-modern, scientific ways of thinking, are necessary in order to embrace the abundant life Jesus came to bring.

Saying that any religion is as good as any other implies that no religion makes any difference one way or another. Frankly, we must either embrace the truth of the gospel, or not. Either the statements Jesus made about himself are true, or they are not. We can't build a shrine to an unknown god, and cover all of our bases.

In fact, we are called, I believe, to sell out. I like that term, "sold out." I heard it for the first time at a conference I attended a few years ago. Apparently it is used regularly in lots of growing, fervent, Spirit-filled churches. "Sold out" means trusting Christ in all things. It means believing he is who he says he is, and living a "sold out" life in his service. No ifs, ands, or buts. No waffling. No other gods. No other idols. Jesus and only Jesus. Are you sold out?

We can also err on the other side of Christian exclusivism. We are wrong to limit God to what we can understand. We are mistaken if we limit God's grace. God is always reaching out to more people, in more places, and in more ways than we have imagined. Jesus says in John chapter 10, "I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. I have other sheep who are not of this fold and I must bring them also."

Our world is very, very much like Paul's. We are surrounded by people who believe a stunning variety of things, or nothing at all. Paul meets the Athenians where they are, and offers to them a compelling picture of Jesus the Messiah. And yes, we are commanded to do the same. Preaching Christ with love and compassion, always being ready, as written in 1 Peter, "to make a defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope we have." Our work is not to condemn those who have not yet embraced Christ, but to love them with the love of Christ, and to draw them to him through our words and actions. The judge on the last day is Christ and only Christ, not us. We are commanded only to demonstrate the self-giving, self-sacrificing love that he displayed when he allowed himself to be crucified for us.

No waffling. No other gods. No other idols. No playing it safe. No shrines to unknown gods. Jesus and only Jesus. Are you sold out?