



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

May 25, 2014

“Ignorant Worship”

(Acts 17:22)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Paul . . . said: ‘Men of Athens, I see . . . you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked at the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you”

Collect of the Day

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Earlier this spring I got a haircut at “Stadium Barbers” in Madison. It’s a run down, busy little place across the street from Camp Randall. “Stadium Barbers” is an institution; Kingdoms come and go, nations rise and fall, but “Stadium Barbers” stands firmly entrenched. It is a grounded place where all pretensions and distinctions are set aside. Professors and students and the occasional Lutheran pastor from Watertown . . . they all get the same haircut whether they want it or not. There are usually four guys cutting hair; the banter is non-stop.

The guy cutting my hair was a big, burly fellow by the name of “Chuckie”, northwoods look, 6’1, maybe 280 pounds. He likes to provoke a good conversation. We were talking bucket lists that day; one of the things on his is to go ice fishing in April . . . in Madison. “By golly this might be the year” he said. The barber to my left said, “If Chuckie goes through the ice, I get his sheers.” Ignoring that, Chuckie changed the topic. “*Easter* is in April. I suppose you’ll have a big crowd of Lutherans over there in Watertown.” “Probably so”, I said. “I suppose you’ll argue them into the resurrection?”, he said with those clippers snipping perilously close to my ears. “I try not to argue with my congregation” I said, “especially on *Easter*.” “Good thing too” piped up someone down the line, “because there will be more of them than you.” “I don’t argue” I repeated. “I just proclaim, and they can do with it what they will.”

Something like that is happening in Acts chapter 17. Paul is proclaiming the Word in the heart of Athens. He's not arguing with these people. Verse 18: ". . . he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." And we see he's doing it as carefully and winsomely as he can. Paul's trying to win over hearts, and he's not going to do that just by winning arguments.

Earlier, Paul walked the streets of Athens and noticed all the pagan monuments and idols and altars. He took particular note of the one set aside to the "unknown god." The Greeks had many gods, and were fearful they might anger a god by ignoring him or her, and so they built this altar to ensure no significant deity was being ignored. Paul uses it to launch a carefully constructed sermon, sensitive even, with a sharp word stuck in the middle of it. "I see you are very religious" Paul says, "For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.'" I read the next verse from the King James version so that the sharpness is not lost: "Whom you therefore ignorantly worship, him I declare unto you."

Ignorant worship. I suppose the first thing we have to do is consider the question, "Is there such a thing anymore as ignorant worship?" Some, today, would probably say "no." They would probably say, "To each his own. All religions are basically the same, anyway. We all basically worship the same god." But that is a whopper of a lie because they cannot all be true. Christianity, Judaism and Islam, for example teach many things that are at complete odds with one another. They are mutually exclusive. Conceivably they could all be wrong, but they cannot all be right, for the claims of one will exclude the other.

There is such a thing as ignorant worship. Not everyone is worshipping the living God. Many are worshipping lifeless idols. In the Old Testament lesson, you remember Moses was away and the people were yearning for something tangible to worship, something visible, something their faith could grab hold of. In that day, a common symbol of fertility and power was a bull. So they chose that for their idol. It was probably carved of wood and then overlaid with gold. When it was finished, Aaron stood back and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Whatever possessed Aaron to say such a thing?! Better said, “Who possessed Aaron to say that?” I think we know the answer to that.

It was ignorant worship. The golden calf did not deliver them. God did. And the least they could do was remember that and give credit where credit was due. Remembering what God has done for us is what prevents us from uninformed, ignorant worship.

Now, let’s not be too hasty to judge and dismiss these people as primitive and unsophisticated. Think about the false gods you have erected in your own lives, the false images to which you bow down, the unknown gods to which in ignorance or in fear you pay tribute, those idols to which you give more attention, devotion, and priority than you give to the God who created you, sustains and redeemed you.

This last weekend many universities and colleges celebrated graduation. Once upon a time students were embarrassed to say that what they wanted to do now was make money, and lots of it, as fast as possible. They blush no more. Money is the most common idol in our land. “If you love money” Proverbs says, “you’ll never have enough of it.” And so most of us, if asked whether we have enough money, enough income, most of us would say, “I could use a little more.” We’ve always been saying that, because we love money.

Success is another common idol we talk about and read about in the newspaper. But that too is a false idol. The pages of history are full of successful people who did not live happily ever after. Can success deliver all the goods for you? Not if history is to be believed.

Money, success . . . Now, how about power? We think to ourselves, if only I had the power and the authority, I would do so much good with it! Along the way toward doing the good, however, the one who has power must invariably do what is expedient, what is necessary. “You must break eggs to make an omelet” the saying goes. Think of the anguish of any president of the United States who wanted to use his power to do good, and found that to do so he had to use his power to send young military people to their deaths. That haunts some of our presidents to their own deaths.

Money, success, power. These are tired, old clichés, aren’t they, because they are tired, old idols to which we keep coming back and paying homage. In and of themselves none of these things are bad. There’s nothing inherently evil about money, success, or power. They can all be good. But like the golden calf, they are not and cannot be good enough. The only way you will really know just how weak and impotent these gods are is to have a whiff, a taste, a sample of any one or all of them. The wealthy person is not immune from disease. The powerful person is not impervious to the temptations of the devil. The one who has all three, money, wealth and power, still succumbs to age and death.

Even so, when we do have money, success and power, it becomes so easy to forget who it is that creates, sustains, and redeems us. It becomes so easy to forget who it is who brought us out of the land of slavery to sin, death and the devil and into the freedom we have in Christ. That is, having money, success and

power does tend to breed ignorant worship.

The people in Athens were worshipping an unknown god. But as Christians we worship on the basis of the record. Who, for example, created you out of nothing? Who gave you the breath of life from his own mouth? Who protected you in your weakness? Who gave his own life for you on a cross? Who comes to you through his Word and comforts you in your moments of deep anxiety and fear and frustration? Who is capable of giving you the only peace that is so utterly inexpressible, a peace that this world simply cannot give? Who does that? Who is it who destroys the last enemy, old death itself, and the fear of death, and gives you the promise of new and everlasting life? Tell me who does all that, and we will build a temple to him and worship him. Anybody else isn't worth the time of day.

Money, power, and success can do none of those things. They are impotent in the face of death, and have nothing to say to death. They can do nothing in the face of fear or terror. Money, power, and success, like drugs, they can give you a high, a thrill, a sensation; but you'll always need more and more. Taking drugs is the satisfaction that never satisfies. Even if you get all the drugs and booze that you want and need, the sum total is death, not just for you but for all who love and care for you. We know that; there's no denying it.

One definition of idolatry is this: Your idol is that to which you flee when you've had a bad day. To whom or what do you flee? To the meth pipe? To the bottle? To the mall? To the website? Do you raid the frig to try to satisfy some spiritual hunger and emptiness? To worship these things . . . to be seduced by these things, tempted and enraptured by these things, is to be deceived: it is ignorant worship.

Do you remember what Moses did in his fury over the golden calf? First, he burned it (that's why we think it was made of wood overlaid with gold). Then he ground the ashes into a powder and scattered the powder on some water and forced the people to drink it. Now, he was a little ticked off and maybe went too far. But here is the point: a god you can create is a god you can destroy and consume, and that god is not worth your time or your trouble.

And so to the people of Athens, Paul didn't preach money, success and power. He preached the death and resurrection of Jesus, for our own forgiveness and salvation. After all, what good is a god that cannot deliver on our ultimate need? What good is a god that cannot alleviate the ultimate terror, and promise the ultimate reward? What good is a god that cannot defeat death either for himself or us? Therefore, Paul preached Jesus and the resurrection.

We worship what we know, what God has revealed to us in Scripture, what we have experienced, what we expect. We worship the living God because we know what he has done for us, created us, redeemed us and called us. We worship the One who promises that not even death will have the final dominion over us. We worship the One who is not impotent nor mute before death, but needs only say the word, like "Lazarus, come forth" and it will happen.

We do not worship an unknown, lifeless god. It is not ignorant worship. We worship the living God, the One we know and the One who knows us, every hair on our head. He is, after all, the one who created us, and still sustains us. He is the one who forgives us and loves us and delivers us from sin, death and the devil. He is the one who has called us by name and made us his own. That is the One we worship: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

