

Tough Hope

1Peter 3:6-9, 15; Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

The Apostle Paul had some chutzpah. If he were a preacher in our day and time he would be using every social media outlet available, finagle a guest appearance on every TV and radio talk show possible. He would say and do daring and countercultural things that would go viral. He would scold governments and institutions alike and call for their repentance. If you'd like to hear a modern day preacher like him, tune in to the Poor People's Campaign and the work they are doing.

In today's scripture lesson, Paul found himself in Athens, the philosophical banter and debate capitol of the world. Waiting on two friends to join him on his evangelism/mission trip, he had some time to kill. He spent it walking around observing and studying the culture in which he was immersed. He carefully noted all the idols and objects of worship throughout the city. When he happened across one labeled To the Unknown God, he found his in.

So when he was invited to speak at the Areopagus, he knew how to be most effective. The Areopagus was both a place, a hilltop in Athens where the recreational debaters and armchair philosophers gathered, and a group of officials that settled disputes of law.

Paul remarked on their religiosity. 'I see you have many gods.' Then he announced the good news. I know the unknown God whose altar I see you have erected. He spoke of the God that had been missing from their ranks as first Creator of all, who cannot be contained within a temple or any one place, a God who is near and available to all, a God in Whom we live, and move, and have our being, a God calling us away from the ignorance of thinking an image can be made in gold or silver or stone, a God calling us to repent from such nonsense and know that we will be judged with justice. A God insisting that for all to be good, all wrong has to stop. The one who will judge has already been chosen and been raised from the dead.

That's a remarkable list of God characteristics. They were used to having a separate god for each thing. One for war, one for fertility, one for harvest, one for weather, one for health, and so on. Paul's claim on the God of all would have astounded them. Most reacted by sneering and jeering. Only a few that day were interested in hearing more, and became believers.

Paul made remarkable strides in his own personal growth. He traveled thousands of miles, planting numerous churches. He wrote to many of the churches letters that are now included in our scripture. Have you ever wondered how it was possible for him to do so much and stay so strong in his faith?

I believe it was because of the influence of the Holy Spirit in his life. Paul's spiritual awakening was like no other. Jesus struck him blind and struck him down off his high horse, literally. After some remarkable visions and prayers, Paul was used mightily. Remember that little song Lori sang? Spirit of the Living God? Be warned, it is a powerful prayer to open yourself up to. I do hope we mean it when we sing it.

The Holy Spirit is the Counselor Jesus promised to send us. Also known as Advocate, Helper, Intercessor, Comforter, Paraclete. The Spirit is One who comes and stands alongside us, who defends us, gives us courage and strength, prays for us when we have no words, empowers us to do what God calls us to do. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me. We sing that and we will find the Spirit pushing, prodding, poking, pestering us.

When Paul saw the altar to the unknown god, he interpreted it as a cultural admission that something was missing. Ironic in the midst of the world's center of knowledge that they knew there was still an unknown. All of their gods were insufficient. Paul comes along and claims that his God is all sufficient. I wonder what Paul would surmise walking through our culture today? What idols and nonsensical thinking would he scold us about, declare we need to repent of? I think the gods are just as numerous and just as impotent as those in ancient Athens. I think we need Jesus' Paraclete to come alongside us. I think when the

God who judges with justice judges us, we will have some melting and remolding to do.

In this world of many idols and gods, why do we call ourselves Christians?

Why Christian? What does that mean to you?

Most importantly, how does the world know us?

What words and actions are they witnessing as a testimony of our faith or as hypocrisy of it?

When I finish, Susie is going to sing 'They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.'

That's THE command that Jesus referred to when he said, if (meaning when or since) you love me, you will obey my command. The only command he gave his disciples was 'love one another as I have loved you.'

You have heard of some people being infected with the Covid-19 virus and being asymptomatic. They show no signs of having the virus, no symptoms. Let us not be asymptomatic Christians, behaving in a way that is indistinguishable from those who are not.

In tough times, let us practice tough love, and tough hope, continuing to do good, and walking alongside those who are struggling and need us, just as we need the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Holy God, we give you thanks for your Holy Spirit. May we be willing and open to the guidance and wisdom and prompting sent from you. May our name of Christianity give your Christ the glory He deserves. Amen.