

Acts 17:16-34: “Ends” In Mind IV: To Athens

Introduction:

Well, friends. It feels like months since I've seen you all, which is crazy, but the way of summer.

Today we're talking about a passage that's super famous. Really, really famous. It's Paul's "Mars Hill Speech," and there's something...oh, weird about preaching on a passage that's sort of a favorite for people to preach on, to study, to talk about. There's a city named Mars Hill in North Carolina, you know? Anything I share this morning is something we can find in our Study Bibles, in commentaries, online.

But that's always true, right? What's always unique, of course, is us: the interpreting community, the specific situation that we're in, this moment in time and place out of which we read this passage. So let's pray that as we read this famous, famous passage, there's something in it for us now. And I believe there is, because there always has been for all the other times we've seen it, studied it, and all the other ones who have done the same.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Set-up: Waiting

So. Paul's in Athens. The Athens. The famous one. Not the Ohio one. He's been told to wait, basically, for Timothy and Silas. He's been hustled away from the Thessalonians, who are having nothing to do with this Jesus is the Messiah stuff. And so he waits. But Paul is, you know, driven. He doesn't read quietly. He hustles himself out to engage people. So far in Acts, Paul's the type of guy who, like, stands up as soon as he sits down, you know? Makes hay while the sun shines, and doesn't. If he were a toddler we'd call him "spirited."

So he's waiting in Athens. He's engaging with anyone who'll talk with him: In the synagogue with Jews and God-fearers, in the marketplace, with, as Luke puts it, "those who happened to be there." And one thing that particularly troubles him is how there are just idols everywhere, statues and images to greek and roman and other false gods all over the place. He doesn't like it.

Set-up: On Athens

Athens was the center of Greek philosophical thought. It was incredibly important. And it remained the center of Greek philosophical thought, and a wellspring of philosophical movements for hundreds of years. Luke writes, as an aside, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." They loved ideas.

I love this: Paul's "in the in the marketplace day by day with

those who happened to be there.” So he’s doing his thing, hanging out, and we read:

18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

What we probably don’t see is that the Stoics and the Epicureans were like, philosophical rivals. They’re like the Sharks and the Jets. You can read all about their core beliefs someday if you want, but what I really think must have been happening is that these two groups were in, like, a debate by some market stall and Paul comes up and interrupts them, and is so sort of, persistent, that they start debating him. It’s the only thing I can imagine.

19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” 21

They haul him off to the Areopagus. It’s crazy.

Set-up: On the Marketplace:

This idea of Paul engaging in the Marketplace has been hugely significant to Christianity in the past, oh, 100 years especially. And the past 25 years have seen a particularly, let's say, Silicon Valley take on the idea, which we'll talk about. But the idea that Paul doesn't go to just the religious places, the synagogue, and engage with people there has become a sort of paradigm of behavior that Christians emulate.

In my office right now, you'll find countless--because I haven't counted them; 10 or 15--books that first establish what they perceive as today's marketplace, and then argue for how to engage it well the way Paul engaged the marketplace around him. Most of them focus on ministry in places of work, of business, which is fine. Agora, our sister congregation in Dublin, is named after the word we translate "Marketplace," and was originally meant to be an online, marketplace-of-ideas forum, a Christian web community, but quickly spilled out into meatspace, real life.

The corrective is good. Not everyone is going to be a pastor, right? And if we make church-work and the church-place the only valid, legitimate act of work and the only place to work for God, then, you know: too-bad, so-sad for the vast majority of us who have "worldly" jobs, and non-church-related obligations.

So this emphasis corrects an idea that the best work is

vocational Christian work.

At the Areopagus:

So Paul is invited to the Areopagus. We could go there tomorrow, if we wanted. It's still there. The name means "Ares' Hill," even though it's less hill and more huge stone outcropping, like something you'd see down in Hocking Hills. In Greek Mythology, it was the place where Ares, a mythological Greek god, was tried for killing the son of Poseidon, another god, but the myth may have come after the name, as an explanation for what it was called what it was called. So. Romans called Ares "Mars," and now, for whatever reason, Mars Hill is what the place is generally called by English-speaking Christians. But the Areopagus, Mars' Hill, was an assembling place, it functioned as a court, and a decision-making place for people. It was more than just a place; it was the group that ran the place. The Areopagus at the Areopagus. It was a town hall for judicial, religious, political, and philosophical debate and discussion. Think "Athen's Town Hall" when you hear "Mars' Hill," and the people who meet there. Imagine if our judges all presided on judge street.

Let's race through the speech Paul gives in this Town Hall Meeting:

Race: You All?

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Paul says that the Athens are “in every way, very pious,” or “religious.” They are attentive to their society’s gods, and their way of life is oriented around worship; piety and civil society went hand-in-hand.

And the Athenians cover their bases. They don’t want to make any possible “god” mad, so they put up an altar to anyone that they may have forgotten. This makes total sense if you view the world as one in which unseen, spiritual entities are everywhere and also are super capricious, will mess with you just because.

And, look, Paul is brilliant here. He just is. Books have been written about Paul’s use of rhetoric, which was considered a high art in Greek Philosophy. He knows his audience, and he knows what they’re expecting, and he can give it. He sees this “unknown god” altar as a way to introduce Israel’s God, the only God that’s more than myth, that isn’t capricious, and explains to them the nature of the God that they haven’t

known about.

Race: God?

24 “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 human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’[b] As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’[c]

Brilliant Again: Notice things here. He quotes well-known Athenian poets, he appeals to the philosophical sensibilities of the crowd, laying out a picture of God that is utterly accurate, but is also shaded, explained, nuanced in ways that make God acceptable. He talks about nations; people-groups, not nation-states. Nations, by the way, is almost equivalent to “gentiles” in Jewish writing and parts of the Old Testament. Paul is basically affirming the way the Athenians view the world, but centering that view on the only true God,

who they have.

Paul eases them right in to seeing God for who God is, and what God has done, even as he validates parts of their view of the world. He minimizes the friction that can happen when worldviews collide or God comes up. We don't always, of course. In fact, American Christianity has a long history of maximizing the friction that comes up when God's being discussed. We lead with sin and punishment; we present the Good News about Jesus with the start that a person is broken.

Our VBS this year was awesome. It was great. The children had a blast, and our volunteers put together what I think was the finest we've had since we relaunched the program. I was blessed to be a part of it. But it didn't take Paul's route, you know? Its first goal was to make sure that we as teachers made sure the young children we were talking about God with knew that they were sinners. I laughed out loud at the audacity, earnestness, and priorities in my teacher's manual, which, when listing what we needed to know about children, started by saying "Children are born sinners." Okay. Paul leads with the nature of God, and he presents God in a way that is native, understandable, and sparks curiosity in the ones who are listening. He starts by telling them they are God's offspring, that God is invested in them and claims them.

And, look, in Greek and Roman mythology, the gods were basically all-powerful toddlers, capricious, human-like in the worst ways. People just get along in spite of them. Despite this, often Greek and Roman heroes were all half-gods, whose human parent was not often a consensual partner. Greeks lived with ambivalence about the gods. And Paul engages this ambivalence in a powerful way, as he says they're heroes, descendants of God, but God isn't capricious like their false-gods are.

Race: Past, Present, & Future

And then Paul continues. He points out that there's a because, here. If we're God's offspring, we ought to be a certain way. And that way lines up with a certain person who God has appointed to judge the world. We know that person is Jesus; Paul doesn't even mention Jesus by name in and to the Areopagus.

He does, though, lay out his core theology: That there is no room for idolatry now that God has revealed himself, that those who want to live for God are called to repent, and trust that the "man God has appointed" will judge them justly. That the proof of this is that God has raised that man from the dead.

Paul says this:

29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should

not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Racing: Dismissive, Curious, Convinced

Some dismiss Paul. Some are curious to hear more. Some of them become followers of Paul, believing him. Dionysius is one of them. Damaris, too. One scholar, Craig Keener, suggest that Damaris was there--which was an unusual thing for a woman--because she was a stoic, which included women among their ranks. Dionysius is an important guy. He became, according to Church history, the first Bishop of Athens. He's the city's patron saint, and a saint in both the Catholic and Orthodox church. The ancient church historian quotes a much later Dionysius, who tells a story that this one, today's, he was at Jesus' crucifixion, and it always lingered with him, and God used Paul's preaching to confirm Jesus' messiahship. It's a nice story. Another is that he was burned to death; not so nice, but did get to attend Mary, Jesus' mother's funeral before that. This is how the end goes:

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the

dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Mode & Message: Steps One & Two

I want to return to this incredibly important paradigm Paul sets for us. Let’s just accept that what Paul does in Athens counts as a paradigm that we should follow, should emulate. Paul goes to the Marketplace to talk about God, and we should, too.

There are, I’m sure, people God has called to go to religious places, as Paul and his cohort often go to the synagogue. It’s a fine calling. But it’s never been meant to be the only calling for God’s People, and it was never meant to be the primary calling for God’s People, which in some ways in our place and time it’s become.

And the way the Church has emphasized Paul’s activity in the marketplace in recent decades is good. It’s an important corrective. Because if the only place to do religious, Jesus-y stuff, do stuff for God, is on the church’s property, then you’ll always, always end up insular, you end up making mountains out of molehills, you end up focusing with ever finer degree on the differences between you and the people who God has

brought you together with. This just happens. Protecting the purity of your community becomes more important than positioning those around you to experience the power of God. If your only place to be busy for God is the church property and programs and people, you'll become a busy-body, not busy doing good.

Here's my point though: Paul did take the first step of going to the Marketplace. He didn't overthink it. He went to where tons of people were, where they functionally had to be if they were going to survive in the city, going to live there and eat. And he talked to whomever would listen. That's a critical first step; it's one that we don't always take, we introverted Smoky Row-ers.

But we aren't always going to get the second step he got, which is to be invited on stage to describe more of what we believe. Paul was given the mic at and to the Areopagus. He was given a microphone by people who just wanted to hear some new things. They didn't even, like, care much about the content of what he was bringing. They just like ideas. "Share whatever. We'll listen."

And I point this out because we're unlikely to be given that mic. We're unlikely to be invited to share whatever we want about God with a group of deeply influential people in society, who really want to hear what we have to say. You may. I might. But that is entirely out of our control. Luke

wants us, I think, to see that God is working in this, here.

A Response:

And one response we can have to this reality is to do what many of the books in my office will suggest, which is consider strategy, figure out ways to infiltrate the marketplace--whatever that means for us. I'm fine considering how to position ourselves to be put into the middle of situations in which we can influence those with influence, shape those who help shape our society. That makes sense to me.

In Process:

But as I've read these books, and listened to Christian TED talks, and read blog posts on how critical it is for us to engage the marketplace like Paul did, I've had a consistently uncomfortable feeling in my gut. A worry.

I worry that Paul's engagement with the marketplace, which is a paradigm for us, has itself been co-opted by market forces. I worry that Paul's engagement with the marketplace has itself been co-opted by market forces.

What I mean is that I worry that our deep desire to be invited to the Areopagus--to have that level of influence--causes us, too often, to unreflectively assume that whatever will get that influence for us must be good. And the fact that this sounds so reasonable--how could influence be bad if we use

it for God?--just reveals how deeply our principles are guided not by faithfulness, but by pragmatism.

All Paul did was go to the place where people had to go and talk about God to whoever showed up and would listen. He inserted himself, somehow, in the middle of two rival groups, and was invited--as an act of God, as a consequence of being in the right place at the right time--to influence people who had influence. He didn't position himself through strategic intervention and clever use of techniques to infiltrate one of the most influential groups in Athens. He just acted faithfully in a public place, and talked with whoever would listen about God.

So to ask people to strategically infiltrate whatever counts as an Areopagus now, without lingering in whatever place people are and just being faithful feels...like a misunderstanding of Luke, somehow. That's not engaging the marketplace, that's doing...something else. I'm not sure what it is, and I could be convinced its good, but it's not what Paul did in Athens, as far as Luke tells the story.

Finally:

And ultimately, I think the reason that I have concerns about engaging the marketplace with its own strategies, is that sometimes the marketplace, the place where business and shopping and life happens--sometimes it needs radically condemned.

Sometimes the methods and modes of the world need condemned, not embraced. You can't get peace through superior firepower; you can't hate people into loving you; you can't be reimbursed for forgiveness; you can't imprison people for freedom. Sometimes the ways of the world, the ways of the places where "we live and breath and have our being," where we buy and sell and learn and live, they need condemned, not embraced.

We are all participants in some part of some marketplace. We are engaged in workplaces, in communities, in groups, and each of them come with some sort subculture, which has some set of core values and habits that it brings. Tech loves disruption; Higher-ed loves publishing; homemaking loves self-sacrifice. The pastorate loves numbers. The places where we can easily engage as Paul engaged sometimes don't need engaged on their own terms; they need condemned on Jesus'. Regulation needs embraced, publishing needs subsumed by teaching, self-sacrifice needs overtaken by empowerment, numbers need overwhelmed by influence.

If we uncritically adopt as good the principles and values of our workplace, or use whatever our subculture values most to get ourselves influence in our subculture, I think we're in trouble. I think it's a myth that we can sin our way to holiness, or evil our way to good. I think we miss faithfulness

in an attempt to get invited to the Areopagus, in our attempt to influence the influencers.

Paul was in the right place at the right time because he was doing what God wanted him to do out and about where people were. That should be what we pursue, what we celebrate, what we encourage people to do. Are you in the right place at the right time? God is with you, everywhere you go. What bothers you about the world? What does God say about it, and how can the people in the places you go come to realize that through you?