

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 17, 2020

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Acts 17:22-31 (EHV)

Then Paul stood up in front of the council of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. 23 For as I was walking around and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar on which had been inscribed, ‘To an unknown god.’ Now what you worship as unknown—this is what I am going to proclaim to you. 24 **“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made with hands.** 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives all people life and breath and everything they have. 26 **From one man, he made every nation of mankind to live over the entire face of the earth. He determined the appointed times and the boundaries where they would live.** 27 **He did this so they would seek God** and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘Indeed, we are also his offspring.’ 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 formed by human skill and planning. 30 Although God overlooked the times of ignorance, **he is now commanding all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he appointed. He provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”**

Dear friends in Christ:

When the Apostle Paul looked around as he was visiting the city of Athens he formed a conclusion. He concluded that the people living there were a religious people – they had a variety of philosophical values that guided them in their lives. They had certain rituals – we might call them superstitions that they were careful to incorporate into their normal activities.

Although certain things have changed in the centuries which have passed since Paul visited Athens – there are some things that are similar. It may not be as obvious as it was a decade or more ago but we still live in an area where the majority of people claim to be religious. Census data from 2010 reported that there were 130 different churches in Sheboygan County and 59% of the population claimed a religious affiliation. Twenty years ago 72% of the people in Sheboygan County claimed church membership.¹ Nationwide that number dropped to just slightly over 48% in 2010.² Although participation in organized religion is on the decline you don’t need to conduct a survey to discover that most people still have certain values and ideas which motivate them and which they follow as they live their lives. These similarities between Sheboygan County in 2020 and Athens in the first century A.D. are evidence of the fact that all people have a natural knowledge of God.

Paul saw that the people in Athens had erected many altars to worship many gods. That led him to conclude that these people needed to know the true God and what he had done for them. Religious diversity is common today. However the concept of many gods isn’t a part of our current religious scene. Today the ecumenical spirit suggests that there is only one God but that he has revealed himself in various ways to various people and that people have different ways of relating to the same God. An honest appraisal of this philosophy shows that people today still need to know the true God and what he has done for them.

¹ <http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/rcms2010a.asp?U=55117&T=county&Y=2010&S=Name>

² http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/u/rcms2010_99_US_name_2010.asp

Our text reminds us who the true God is and what he has done for us so that we can use this information as Paul did to reach out to others in our religious society. Paul reminds us:

In God We Live and Move and Have our Being

1. God has created us.
2. God directs our lives.
3. God saves us.

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made with hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives all people life and breath and everything they have. 26 From one man, he made every nation of mankind to live over the entire face of the earth. He determined the appointed times and the boundaries where they would live.

In our religiously diverse culture the fact that God made the world and everything in it is not universally accepted. The teaching of Creation doesn't agree with the “religious philosophy” of most people today. In fact those who try to defend the truth that God created all things in six 24 hour days as explained to us in the opening chapters of Genesis are regarded as being out of touch with reality. Does it really make a difference if a person believes that God created the world and everything in it? Does it really make a difference if we regard God as the one who gives all men their life and their breath and everything else?

It does in more ways than most would be willing to admit. Since God is the one who has made all things and who created us – that means that human beings are accountable to him. It means that he is greater than we are. It means that we're not number 1. It means that we can't just do whatever we desire. It means that there will be some things which we will not be able to figure out. It means that we are not in control of our destiny and that we may not be able to become anything that we desire. All of those ideas are in direct conflict with the prevailing attitudes of our society and culture today. Most of those ideas are offshoots of the evolutionary theory which is commonly taught in our public schools and is accepted by many. This theory suggests that man is simply the most highly developed organism on the evolutionary chart. Unfortunately this is a theory which denies our accountability to God and which denies him the honor and credit which he is due. It's a theory which suggests that God can be anything we want him to be and that maybe we don't really need him at all. It's a theory which leads to a disregard for the sanctity of human life.

On the other hand those who acknowledge that God is their creator, the ruler of all and the preserver of all – will take a different approach to life. They will humbly acknowledge their dependence upon one who is greater and more powerful than we are. Those who acknowledge God as their Creator will be willing to be guided and directed by him. They will look at science and technology as gifts of a caring God rather than the only solution to all that troubles mankind. This can provide us with a great deal of comfort if we are willing to set aside our sinful desire to think of ourselves as superior to God.

The fact that God directs our lives is clearly stated in our text. Paul reminds us that the true God **“made every nation of mankind to live over the entire face of the earth. He determined the appointed times and the boundaries where they would live.”**

All of history is in the hands of God. Governments succeed and fail; nations become powerful and grow weak according to his will. The days of our lives are numbered by God. He is in control of them. Jesus even tells us that the hairs of our heads are numbered to remind us our God's concern for us. Once again this is an important truth that is often ignored in our “religious” culture. But ultimately it's a truth that offers us

reassurance and comfort as Jesus pointed out in his Sermon on the Mount when he pointed out the value of serving the Lord and putting our lives in his hands.

Matthew 6:24-33 (EHV) **“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon. 25 “For this reason I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? 27 “Which of you can add a single moment to his lifespan by worrying? 28 Why do you worry about clothing? Consider how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin, 29 but I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will he not clothe you even more, you of little faith? 31 “So do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32 For the unbelievers chase after all these things. Certainly your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

Paul explained in our text that the real God who created us and directs our lives makes his presence known to us so that we might seek him out and enjoy his blessings with due respect. **‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘Indeed, we are also his offspring.’** The Greek poets and philosophers spoke of men as being children of God. Oddly enough that’s still a popular notion today in spite of the popularity of the evolutionary theory. Yet the people in Athens, as people today, often ended up confusing the creator with the creature. We like to subject God to our own whims and desires. The ancient Athenians showed that same attitude by making and fashioning gods out of gold, silver or stone. Our society does it by trying to exclude God from our thought process. The end result is the same: (Romans 1:21 EHV) ... **even though they knew God, they did not honor him or give him thanks as God. Instead, their thinking became nonsense, and their senseless heart was darkened.**

Paul told the Athenians that **although God overlooked the times of ignorance, he is now commanding all people everywhere to repent.** The need for repentance applies to us today as well.

It’s obvious that sin has ruined the perfection that God made. In fact sin leads people to reject the Creator/God and to lean on their empty and foolish thinking. Sin affects our lives, too. By nature you and I were separated from God. We were conceived and born in sin as the Psalmist teaches us: **I was guilty when I was born. I was sinful when my mother conceived me.** (Psalm 51:5 EHV) We have also fallen victim to many of Satan’s lies.

Once again God took control of the situation and provided mankind with a Savior. And God also called us to faith through the power of his saving Gospel. Through faith in Jesus we confess that in God we live and move and have our being. When we say that, as Christians, we are acknowledging that Jesus has saved us from sin and saved us for God. We have been led to repentance through the work of the Holy Spirit who has enabled us to see the one and only Savior God.

It is important for all men be lead to this same truth because as Paul reminds us in our text: [God] **he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he appointed. He provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.**

Like so many people today the Athenians were convinced that they could escape God’s judgment by their own actions or philosophies. But man is accountable to God whether he wishes to admit it or not. There

will be a day of accounting and there is nothing we can do to change that fact. God has appointed Jesus as the judge.

God graciously invites sinners to turn from unrighteousness and to trust his grace. That's what seeking him means. And that's what God wants all men to do with the time he has given to them. When the Day of Judgment arrives it will be too late. On that day an accounting will be made of how each person has lived their life. The actions of all will stand as an open book revealing those who lived by faith in Jesus their Savior and those who did not.

God sent his Son to restore sinful mankind to their place in his family. Those who reject what Jesus has done for them will live their lives as if they and not God are in charge. Those who believe that Jesus is their Savior will live their lives as God's children confident that they will live forever with him in eternity. The risen Jesus assures us of life after death. His resurrection assures us that our salvation is complete and sure. His resurrection assures us that we live because he lives. Our goal is to give glory and honor to our Savior God. We do that by pointing to him as the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

This is a message which the people in Athens – religious though they were – needed to hear. It's a message which we need to hear. It's a message which we need to share with our neighbors – religious though they are – because so much of what passes for religion today has been undermined by the notions that God is what man wants him to be. There is only one God – the one who made us, the one who directs our lives, the one who saved us by sending Jesus to rescue us from sin and death. Many we boldly and skillfully follow the example of Paul as we proclaim this God as the one and only true God for all people. Amen.