

“Knowledge is Power”
Acts 17:22-34
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2023
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Scripture: Acts 17:22-34

Now Paul stood in the center of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see in everything how devout you are. For passing through and regarding objects of your worship, I found an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What, therefore, you all worship as unknown, this is what I proclaim to you: The God who made the world and everything in it, the one who is Sovereign of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by human hands. Neither is God served by human hands because of needing anything, since God gives to all life and breath and all things. From one person God made all nations, all persons [women, men, and children], to inhabit the face of the earth and God ordered seasons and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would search for God and perhaps reach for God and find God, yet indeed God is not far from any one of us. For ‘In God we live and move and have our being’; just as some among your poets have said, ‘For we too are the offspring of God.’

“Since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divine is like gold, or silver, or stone, and image formed by the craft and creativity of women and men. At one time God overlooked ignorance; now God commands all women and men everywhere to repent. For God has fixed a day on which God intends to judge the world in righteousness through a man whom God has appointed, giving assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

They heard of the resurrection of the dead. Some scoffed, yet others said, “We will hear you again about this.” Thus Paul left from their midst. Now some joined him, believing, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Dmaris, as well as others with them.

Since I was a child, I have loved learning. I rejoiced every time a new Eyewitness Encyclopedia came out on a specific topic like mushrooms, space travel, or coral reefs. I watched Bill Nye the Science Guy and Wishbone and Zoom and Mr. Rogers and Reading Rainbow religiously, soaking up every piece of classic literature and at-home science experiment and book recommendations my curious mind could handle. When visiting my grandparents’ house, I would pick out a random volume of encyclopedia and flip through it, voraciously reading everything about aardvarks to zithers.

But as I grew older, I realized that, besides a pure love of learning interesting facts about how the world works, there was another reason why I tried to learn so much. Even at a young age, I had a sense that knowledge could make you feel like you were better than someone else. How much you knew, to my young mind, seemed to be linked to your worth as a person, which related to

how people would, or would not, respect you. If I stored up a lot of information, I could prepare for unknowns, which would keep me from being surprised or hurt or disappointed. Knowing a lot of information could offer you protection from people teasing you for being stupid, for saying words you didn't know, for lording their intellect above yours. And I just *dreaded* being teased, embarrassed, or admitting that I didn't know something. I wanted to be smart, intelligent, worthy of respect, elite.

To some extent, I worshipped knowledge.

And knowledge is power, to a great extent. And power is something that most of us want, right? Power is the ability to affect change, to assert independence and ideas and have influence.

Knowledge is one thing that makes power possible!

But all too often, knowledge is something that we hide behind, as well. In my opening remarks, I revealed that this was something I learned to do at a young age—I gained a sense of protection from my intellect and hid behind it. But as I grew, I realized what may seem obvious but is worth saying from time to time: we can't know everything—and probably *shouldn't* know everything there is to know, and so there is a limit to the power that can be gained from one's intellect.

I remember that when I was attending my well-meaning, idealistic undergrad, there was a sense of elitism among some students...they'd say things like, "Oh, you've never heard of intersectionality before? How quaint" or look down on someone for not having read Marx or Nietzsche. I used to be so intimidated by other students' knowledge—I had done the best I could growing up attending public school in my small town, what did they want from me?! Or, as I learned to wonder, what insecurities were speaking so loudly to my fellow students that they needed the elite protection of their intellect? Elitism often hides behind intellectualism, forming boundaries of who is "in" and who is "out" based on how much or what type of knowledge someone possesses.

I think this is similar to what was going on in Athens, the setting for our Scripture text today. Athens in the first century of the Common Era was a center of knowledge and higher learning, the home of storied philosophers and great teachers. Since some time had passed since Socrates, Aristotle and Plato roamed the streets and presented reasoned arguments in the marketplace, the reputation of Athens had dimmed slightly, but it was still a center for philosophical expression. The culture of Athens thrived on scholastic discussion.

Enter Paul, trying to take a break from the opposition he had experienced as he traveled spreading the gospel about Jesus called the Christ, by laying low among the Athenians. But as Paul observes the city, the earlier part of Acts 17 tells us that he was distressed by all of the idols he saw. Remember that ancient Greek religion was polytheistic, so there were many gods who filled different roles. Paul eventually attracts attention enough for the scholars to invite him to the Areopagus, an outcropping of rock traditionally used for hearing legal arguments.

Directly before our Scripture for the day, Acts says that Paul spent time in the civic center of Athens, where Stoic and Epicurean philosophers would regularly debate him. Some thinkers

accused Paul of “babbling,” which some commentators say meant that he was just repeating someone else’s ideas, parroting their thoughts. After all, verse 21 tells us that the Athenians were obsessed with “telling and hearing something new.”

This is still a characteristic of our society today, isn’t it? Many times, something that is shiny and new and exciting has more appeal than something old or historic, which we are tempted to take for granted. That which is novel is often expected to be better or righter than that which is old.

Let me be clear that I know many among us would challenge that assumption, as we in this church community seek to have a healthy balance of understanding the past as well as exploring new ideas.

In our story today, Paul takes advantage of the Athenians’ desire to hear something new and makes a speech that is unlike any others recorded in the Christian Testament. Paul appeals to Greek rhetoric to present his point. He begins by remarking on how he understands the Athenians to be very pious because of the sheer number of statues and monuments honoring the gods he sees around Athens—he says they are even so devout that they worship at the altars of the *unknown* gods! Just in case they didn’t know about them, they made some altars so that a god wouldn’t be forgotten or left out! Then Paul says that he has a new piece of knowledge, which I imagine the Athenians were hungry to learn—that revelation, according to Paul, is that the God of Israel is the “unknown god.”

Pastor Philip Ruge-Jones tells it this way: “Paul begins not with the story of Jesus, nor even that of Abraham. His best hope for sympathy is to focus on the creational work of God. He proclaims God as a source and sustainer of all that is, whom no human construction could contain. Even as he begins to speak of what Israel has known of God, Acts’ Paul emphasizes that this God has already gifted the listening Athenians with something near and dear to them: life and breath. God gave each people their own time and place to dwell. The Athenians whose days were spent in idle conversation would undoubtedly appreciate a God who put them in that place and gave them such a pleasant life. Acts’ Paul lauds the vocation of such people who spend their days seeking and even touching God...He argues that they have indeed made at least incidental contact with the divine because God is so close. Paul chooses as his proof text not a passage of Scripture, but a word from a Greek poet who describes God as the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (17:28). The only time we have had an experience of living, moving, and having our being within another is when we inhabit our mother’s womb. And this image leads to a declaration that humans like both Paul and the Athenians are like offspring of the one in whom they had been carried. Since they have their origin within God, Paul argues that this God who bore them must not be conceived as the work of human hands or inventive minds, but as a living being.”

Paul’s use of Greek rhetoric is clever—for a community that prizes knowledge, reason, logic and philosophy, Paul meets them where they are! Matthew Skinner, a scholar and professor at Luther Seminary, writes, “this passage commends preaching that seeks to establish a foundation of common ground with an audience. The uniqueness of the Athenian sermon within the book of Acts allows it to emphasize this point: you don’t need to quote the Bible or recite the history of

Israel in order to explain the gospel. Sometimes poetry, natural theology, and human experience provide an excellent starting point.¹”

Interestingly, as I read commentaries on this passage in preparation for this sermon, I learned there’s a lot of controversy about this passage among Biblical scholars and Christians. Some people think there’s not enough scriptural references or enough education about the history of God’s people Israel. Some scholars over time criticize this passage for being “too Greek” and not adequately talking about faith in Jesus as the Christ.

But I’m not terribly concerned about that.

Because what I hear Paul doing is *preaching*! Part of preaching is knowing your audience—being able to speak to the real-life situations of those who are listening. Knowing the geographical and environmental context. Understanding what is happening politically, socially and emotionally that affects the listeners. Knowing what kinds of stories, narrative building and rhetorical tools appeal to people. Paul even quotes artists and poets commonly known to the people. But most importantly, in this sermon Paul demonstrates how to balance flashy rhetorical choices that get in an audience’s good graces, with the call to hold to his values and proclaim Christ resurrected.

Paul ends his speech with the point that makes Christianity unique from other traditions, and definitely from belief in the Greek pantheon: he proclaims the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the Christ. That point was central to Paul’s faith, so he *had* to end there, having carefully built his argument so that listeners followed his reasoning. And how did the Athenians receive that proclamation? With ridicule! After all, the great Greek philosophers consistently centered the mind and intellectual prowess over the importance of the body, even understanding bodies and their base desires and daily needs to be necessary to escape. But the scripture tells us that some people wanted to hear Paul talk again—I guess he was interesting enough for that!

I like that this Scripture doesn’t give us the outcome of Paul’s apologetic speech in terms of numbers—you know, “5000 people were baptized this day” or “and everyone who heard him came to believe.” Claims like that. No, the text simply says that some people joined him—Dionysus and Damaris and some others. I like that, because it seems realistic to me: whenever someone is preaching or proclaiming with their words or their actions the Way of Jesus, the truth is that only *some* people will follow. A lot of people, perhaps obsessed with the power of knowledge as the Athenians were at that time, dismiss messages of God’s justice, peace and love as “weak” or “not based in fact” or “too idealistic” or “not worth working on because nothing is ever going to change.” Faith can quickly be put in contrast to knowledge, as something for wimpy, powerless people who want to feel important. The elitism hiding behind intellectualism can be wielded against people whose depth of knowing is found more in the heart than the mind.

So, what *does* faith offer to those of us who prize knowledge highly?

Some of the wisdom of faith is accepting that there is power in not knowing everything, power in ambiguity, power in mystery. The wisdom of faith is acknowledging that *and yet* continuing to lean in, to be in relationship with mystery, to serve the causes of justice, peace and love as

followers of the Way, because that's who and how we are called to *be* in this world. Faith accepts that there is much of God that is unknown, and yet God is present with us, drawing close to the Creation in ways that we experience in our bodies more than in our minds.

Yes, knowledge is power, knowledge is a sign of a desire to learn new things—and yet, how we behave when we lack knowledge is quite telling about our character as well.

We know from living in this world every day that the right answers or the best idea for confronting a situation or an innovative method for solving a problem are not always clear—sometimes, the only thing we can do is the next right thing. If you've seen Disney's *Frozen 2*, you'll know that there is a whole song dedicated to doing the next right thing, as Princess Anna faces grief and uncertainty and a lack of faith in herself. She sings,

"I won't look too far ahead
It's too much for me to take
But break it down to this next breath
This next step
This next choice is one that I can make."

That sounds like faith to me.

You can have all the knowledge in the world, be the smartest person in every room, possess wisdom beyond your years and experience, but there comes a time in everyone's life when the next right thing is to move forward in faith. When there are unknowns, uncertainties and ambiguities. We each must choose to do the next right thing, trusting that God, or the Holy, or Love, or the Great Big Something Else, will be with you.

There came a time for Paul, in this scripture passage, when his rhetorical exhortation was over and he had to proclaim the center of his faith—that God incarnated into a human being, was killed and yet death could not win. A simple, and yet profound, claim that defied rationality. A simple, and yet profound, story that continues to carry weight two thousand years later.

In a commentary on this passage, Matthew Skinner advises, "the gospel isn't embedded in just our peculiar linguistic and cultural matrices. It's in our whole selves, as well. Thus it's connected to our embodied existence, which itself is also pretty peculiar."

Friends, nothing we can ever know intellectually will make us better than anyone else. No amount of book learning or life experience will make us more worthy of respect than anyone else. No theological education or scholarly argumentation or philosophizing will bring us closer to the divine than anyone else. As Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Athenians, he proclaimed a God who is present with Their Creation, and a Christ who knew what it was to inhabit a vulnerable body in this world.

Dear church, knowledge is power. But there is power in mystery as well, and in not knowing. There is power in curiosity, in wonder. There is power in embracing our embodiedness. There is power in wrestling with the call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God each and every day. Amen.