

**Sermon – 6th Pentecost**  
**Acts 17:16-34**  
**May 17, 2020**

**“Well, At Least Two Believed”**

A few years ago, a satanic organization in Detroit unveiled a 9-foot statue of Baphomet, a goat-headed symbol of Satan. A crowd of about 400 paid from \$25 - \$75 for entry to the unveiling party. Several in the crowd shouted, "*Hail, Satan,*" and those with the \$75 tickets got have their picture taken by the sculpture. The one-ton bronze includes two young children looking up adoringly at the devil. The group responsible for this statue is called "*The Satanic Temple*" and their "cause célèbre" is they are opposed to Bible-themed displays on government land. The group transports the sculpture to various places around the country where religious – read Christian – statues or plaques adorn public grounds as a counter protest.

Responses by Christians to the Detroit unveiling included prayer vigils and one by a group called "*The Church Militant*", a Roman Catholic organization, who loaded a six-foot bronze statue of St. Michael on the bed of a pickup truck and drove it around the venue three times while the unveiling of the statue of Baphomet was taking place, saying the St. Michael's Prayer as a counter-witness. (St. Michael if you didn't know is the angel in Revelation 12 who did battle against Lucifer and cast him out of heaven into the abyss.) According to Wikipedia, "*The Satanic Temple uses the “literary”(as opposed to literal) Satan as a foundation for a non-supernatural religion, in order to ... usefully contextualize life experiences and promote pragmatic skepticism...personal autonomy, and curiosity.*"

Well. That must have been quite the sight – a Detroit afternoon of dueling statues. None of this would surprise the Apostle Paul though, who according to Acts 17 wandered into Athens, a city saturated with religious statues and lots of prideful people more than ready to argue their particular religious point of view, and decided for a little counter demonstration of his own. So, he entered a market to argue for the resurrection of Jesus. For his efforts he was called by those “free thinkers” a “*babbler*”, hardly complimentary. Eugene Peterson in his New Testament translation “The Message” has the philosophers calling Paul “*an airhead*.” In ancient Greek the name Paul was called was used of birds who picked up seeds on the market floor and came to refer to vagrants who'd come after hours looking for second-hand goods. Ouch.

To his eternal credit Paul hung with it, even using a statue that otherwise offended him to tell them about the God of all creation – not made nor served with human hands, from whom every ounce of human knowledge comes. And, glory be, just as in Jerusalem at Pentecost, after Peter and the disciples were initially called “drunks” – thousands came to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ because of what Paul said at the Areopagus. Well, not exactly. For sure two did though – we have their names - Dionysius and Demaris. Given the climate in Athens toward “ideas” like the resurrection, two is rather amazing.

For what it’s worth the founders of “The Satanic Temple” refer to themselves as “*atheistic Satanists*” meaning- are you ready for this – they don’t really believe Satan exists. The aim of this group is almost worse than believing in Satan – they want to convince people not to believe in anything. And they do so with pride. Well did C.S Lewis state in his book “Mere Christianity” that “*as long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud (person) is always looking down on things and people; and...as long as you are looking down you cannot (possibly) see something that is above you.*”

Today, the church has a “Paul problem” on our hands - it’s not unusual for followers of Jesus Christ to be labeled “babblers” (or worse) But, as long as we wear it, let’s “babble on” shall we? Somewhere within earshot of you may be a Dionysius or Damaris. Those who believe as the Greeks did that religious belief must live within the bounds of reason are sincere in those beliefs, and though not necessarily more numerous than ever, they sure seem more vocal – often espousing with a ‘Detroit’ sort of fervor a creed that there is nothing to believe in – lending credence to the saying “*there’s no creed like...no creed*”. English writer G.K. Chesterton once warned that “*a people who don’t believe in something can be persuaded to believe in anything.*”

For example – a recent survey of Americans found that 85% of respondents believe there is a universal, shared purpose of human life, and 66% believe they have a “*unique calling or purpose.*” Yet only a small percentage of those referred to God or the Christian faith in defining what the terms “purpose” or “calling” meant. The survey’s author, the respected Barna Organization, found little consensus on how Americans define nice sounding phrases like “purpose in life.” For the largest percentage of respondents, it was “*experiencing happiness or fulfillment in life.*” Others included “*evolving to our full potential physically, emotionally and spiritually, furthering the development of humanity,* and “*living a long, healthy life.*” Less than 1 in 5 said purpose could be defined as “*knowing, loving and serving God.*” So much for our Lord’s command from today’s gospel lesson.

But you love God, and your witness, yes yours, can help us from becoming a people “*who can be persuaded to believe anything*”. For that to happen, we have to know what we believe but also what and why someone else doesn’t believe. How we go about this is the thing. Paul was bold – he was an apostle after all, well enough versed in Greek philosophy to be able to quote from its writers, but what about you and me? We might turn to Peter, also an apostle, who counseled preparedness with humility. He said to his congregations, “*always be prepared to give the reason for the hope that you have – but do this with gentleness and respect.*” Peter knows faith will be tested because it is alien to the world’s thought, but even when so tested, Christians must never become testy.

What are the common barriers to faith sharing? Most say “uncertainty” about how to share the Christian message correctly and succinctly. There is fear of angering someone when we “presume” that they need God in their lives. The biggest barrier however is “*I don’t know where to begin.*” For that we turn to Paul. Where did he begin...with a simple, almost disarming question...“*I see that you are religious people*” – as he gazed at their many statues. That’s how you do it. You look around and listen. You begin by inquiring what someone believes rather than what you believe. You work your way back to Jesus, rather than lead with him. Your conversation might include the following questions (in one form or another).

What are your spiritual beliefs - occasioned by something as innocent a person’s comment or use of the name God – even a poster in their kitchen or bumper sticker on their car. You might then ask (as Paul did) “who is God to you” – “who is Jesus to you.” This is actually the easier part – folks might be willing to offer opinions. But Paul was after the truth – as was his audience in Athens, and that is where things can get challenging – we live in a world of “many truths” ( so obviously not such a new world after all). Here is where you need to talk eternity – carefully but respectfully, and what a person needs to do to be assured their eternity will be with God. You might even say “*if what you are believing about that is not true, would you want to know.*”

You’d be pretty much channeling Paul’s approach in Athens – which truth be told was Paul’s greatest evangelistic failure. The city cast aside with a flick of its intellectual finger the message of life’s source and ultimate meaning, the highest of moral standards, not to mention the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Paul left it deflated, but he also left it with Dionysius and Demaris.

In that great ancient city, centuries of stubborn adherence to its “higher culture” followed, but eventually Athens was undone by its celebration, indeed veneration of that culture, centered on three things - entertainment, intellect and sports – the theater, the academy, and the stadium. No, we’re not living in such a new world, are we?

But by the fourth century visitors to Athens would find that the very place where Paul was dismissed as a “seed chasing babbler” - the “Areopagus” – now stood at the intersection of “St. Paul’s Street” and “the Avenue of Dionysius” - and nearby for good measure there now hangs a plaque with the text of Paul’s sermon from Acts 17. I am not making this up! Press on believers. Failure is not failing to get a positive response for Jesus’ sake – failure is not to try – not to prepare yourself for the moment you might fulfill our Lord’s Great Commission. Jesus said *“I will ask the father, and he will give you another Counselor be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him”*...and that’s really all it takes for someone else to as well. AMEN