

FOR THOSE CONDEMNED TO SEE ALL SIDES OF A QUESTION

Acts 17:16-33

Sermon presented by The Rev. Dr. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church, on January 7, 2007

This morning I'm speaking in particular to those of you condemned to see all sides of a question. This phrase I've borrowed from Act One of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. It's 1912. The character Larry is explaining to his buddies at Harry's Saloon why he'd quit the Socialist-Anarchist movement.

You asked me why I quit the Movement [he says]. I had a lot of good reasons . . . I was forced to admit, at the end of thirty years' devotion to the Cause, that I was never made for it. I was born condemned to be one of those who has to see all sides of a question. When you're damned like that, the questions multiply for you until in the end it's all questions and no answer.

I do believe that some people are "wired" this way, and others not. It's a matter of temperament more than intellect. People simply engage the world variously.

I'm reminded of a favorite *Peanuts* comic strip, from many years ago. Lucy, Linus and Charlie Brown are laying on a hilltop, looking at the clouds.

Lucy says: "Aren't the clouds beautiful? If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the clouds' formations. What do you think you see, Linus?"

"Well, those clouds to me look like the map of the British Honduras in the Carribean," Linus answers, pointing up. "And that cloud there looks like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. And that group of clouds over there [he points again] gives me the impression of the Stoning of Stephen. Yes, I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side."

"Uh huh. That's very good," Lucy says. "And what do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?"

And Charlie Brown says: "Well, I was going to say I saw a duckie and a horsie, but I changed my mind."

When it comes to faith, it's of first importance that we learn to accept and celebrate one another, and learn from each other, in all our various, bewildering, sometimes maddening, but always wondrous differences. "Duckie-and-horsie" people in the church can still love and respect their more skeptical, doubting brothers and sisters in faith, and from them acquire appreciation for the role of restless inquiry in the service of God. And, conversely, those condemned to see all sides of a question can still love and respect those with a more guileless, heartfelt faith, and from them learn to value the profound insight of Ghandi, who said, in all the world's religions, the greatest truths are always the simplest ones.

Today's New Testament Lesson narrates an incident in the life of the Apostle Paul, in the city of Athens. At this time Athens was a quiet little city of 5,000. Athens had been a grand city, during the glory days of Greece, but by New Testament times had lost its former prestige and power. Classicist Hubert M. Martin writes that Athens had become instead a cultural and university town, where the study of philosophy flourished, where Roman senators and other wealthy foreigners sent their sons to study (and came themselves to visit and patronize). Athens was more Princeton than Manhattan. This passage, from the Book of Acts, Chapter 17, opens with the note, in verse 16, that Paul "was deeply distressed to see that Athens was "full of idols." Though "distressed" he hardly could have been surprised, for Athens was a city scornful of religious certainties. The prevailing assumptions were to doubt everything, to assume nothing, and to question all things until there were only questions and no answers. The city was "full of idols" because it was full of various religious and philosophical ideas and practices. Everything was acceptable. It would be enormously challenging for Paul to declare the simple Gospel of grace in such a place, by turns hostile and indifferent to it. But this is the calling to which he had been called. He didn't shirk it. He rolled-up his sleeves and went to work on it.

First, though (v. 17), he went to the synagogue, to speak with fellow Jews about Jesus Christ. This was challenging, as well, of course, but at least with Jewish believers Paul shared a common set of assumptions about the reality and character God, and certain beliefs about the promise of God to redeem His people. So, Paul began his Athens stay on more familiar ground. But his ministry there was not to the Jewish community. It was to declare the Gospel of grace to those beguiled by Greek ideas, and so it's to that purpose that Paul turned next and to which we turn now.

He began teaching in the marketplace. At once he encountered "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" who debated with him, according to verse 18. Now, when you came to church this morning you didn't sign-on for an Introduction to Philosophy lecture, but I will say a word-or-two about each of these, since scripture names them. *Epicurean* philosophy, named after Epicurus, who studied and taught in Athens some 300 years earlier, propounded the idea that the highest good was freedom from pain, and the end to which all life should be directed is tranquility of body, mind and spirit. *Stoicism*, which also originated in Athens, also at about 300 BC, taught that the world is ordered by a divine rational will, and the goal of life and is to accept one's rightful place in the scheme of things, and to fulfill daily duty with humble poise and quiet courage. Stoicism derived its name from the word *stoa*, which is a roofed colonnade or portico where philosophers in Athens gathered to debate ideas. Epicureanism and Stoicism overlapped in many ways. One thing they shared was the rejection of a living, loving God whose greatest wish is to be in personal relationship with His people, to guide and help them along life's way, and to bring them at the end into glad heavenly reunion.

This is the God whom Paul held-up and commended, right there in the Athenian marketplace. He preached the Gospel of grace, announcing that there aren't just questions-upon-questions, endless, useless, futile questions, but that there is an answer to the human predicament: that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ God's perfect love is demonstrated, and made available to all.

Some, hearing this message, were dismissive. They laughed at Paul. They called him a *spermalogos*, a seed-picker, someone who played with inconsequential foolish ideas, like a bird who, little beak open, picks-up stray seeds of grain here-and-there, carries them for awhile, then drops them along the way, where they mercifully fail to take root. Our Bible's translation of this word is "babblers." "What does this babbler want to say?" they ask, taunting him.

But not all are like this. Some are intrigued. They want to hear more. They invite Paul to move out of the tumult of the marketplace, to a quiet hill, Mars Hill, or the Areopagus, where he can present his case uninterrupted. This is one of the impressive things about people who truly are open-minded and wired to see all sides of a question. At their best they step aside from tribal loyalties and party strife, and grant to those whose points-of-view are likely to be unlike their own, a free and fair hearing. "[What you are saying] sounds rather strange to us," they tell Paul. "We would like to know what it means."

Thus he begins.

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription. "To an unknown God."

Such an idol can only be constructed by people who hunch there may be a God, but for whom the reality and character of God is all mystery, a people with inexhaustible tolerance for questions but sharp intolerance of answers.

What therefore you worship as unknown [Paul continues],
this I proclaim to you . . .

and he proceeds to declare the wonders of God's creating, restoring, saving love.

Time does not allow us to work through Paul's sermon at the Areopagus, line-by-line, but the heart of it may be expressed in three phrases he used that day, but whose aim still remains on-target in our day.

First, he declares that it's not God's intent that people "grope for him." We may be among those condemned to see all sides of a question, and keep-on asking questions, question-after-question, but ideally such groping yields eventually to God's decisive self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. God is not unknown. In Christ we see the most perfect representation of God's character – his glory and majesty, his love and mercy, his justice and righteousness, his will that we be his friends, now and always.

Second, Paul declares: "The God who made the world and everything in it . . . does not live in shrines made by human hands." When we eliminate God, or at least exclude a living, loving, personal God, then we inflate other things in this world to religious proportions to fill the vacuum left by God's exclusion. G. K. Chesterton wrote: "When we cease to worship God, we do not worship nothing, we worship anything," anything that comes along, really, strikes our fancy and makes sense to our clouded sensibilities. We may worship a physical object, like the idols Paul saw all around him in Athens. Or we may make an idol out of a possession

(something we own, or yearn to own), property, another person, an activity, a job or role, an institution, a hope, an image of self, an idea, a pleasure, a hero. Anything can substitute for God. Wealth. Fame. You name it. You complete the list, or rather, you may find yourself on the list. Pleasure. Power. Over-intellectualization. A need to impress others. Whatever. Because, here's the thing: we cannot dismiss the whole religious dimension of life and live untroubled by meanings, limitations and mortality. We may think we do away with God, but in truth we erect God-substitutes in His place.

Which leads Paul to say, finally: repent and believe.

His bold invitation there-and then echoes through the corridors of time and space to us, here-and-now, the call of God in Jesus Christ ringing forth as clear and compelling as ever. Down with stubborn barriers to grace! Away with doubt and darkness! Be done with endless groping after God. Let us offer ourselves to Him completely and in simple trust. Let us come to the table He has prepared. Let us rejoice and be glad, this day and all our days, until that Day of Days when we shall be with Him in the splendor of His fullness.