

“Athenian Idol Tour”

Acts 17:22-31

May 29, 2011

If you take a tour through most people’s homes, you quickly get a sense of what they love. You can look at the art on the walls, the books on the shelves, the magazines stacked in the corner, the kitchen gadgets, the tools, the photographs, the knickknacks, the size and number of TVs – all reveal things close to their hearts. Our house, for instance, reveals a lot - you could call us P3 - Pittsburgh, power tools, and pandas – all well-represented at Slaton Manor.

But, if you are really observant on your tour of homes, you learn more than just what a homeowner loves. You learn what they fear – especially if you are willing to, you know, poke around – not that any of you would ever do such a thing. But, if you were a poking around kind of person and you were poking around in our home – you would find fears on display. Locks on the doors and windows: fear of invasion and theft. Fire alarms: fear of destruction. Savings and account statements: fear of instability and poverty. Flashlights: fear of darkness. TVs and radios – fear of silence and boredom. Then, there’s the medicine cabinet. Moisturizer: fear of wrinkles. Make-up: fear of showing wrinkles. Sunscreen: skin cancer. Deodorant: fear of being stinky. You get the idea. Some of these items show good sense. Others show pure silliness. But, all of them reveal fears.

The same could be said of Paul’s tour through Athens which was not a vacation tour and not even a working tour. It was an accidental tour. Paul was there because a group of troublemakers – “ruffians” as they are called in verse 5, followed him from town to town to try to “stir up and incite the crowds.” They were so afraid that Paul and Silas and Timothy would inspire others, and in so doing, take away their core beliefs, their power, their traditions. And, indeed, the three amigos were having some success in preaching to people who got excited about the message and believed...both men and women. When the ‘ruffians’ heard that Paul was continuing to preach and ignoring their threats, they tracked him down –and the believers sent him away to Athens for his own safety. He was to wait there until his ‘partners in crime’ – Silas and Timothy - could catch up with him. So, Paul, with time to kill, went on tour.

You might have seen the TV show *Kitchen Nightmares* with the foul-mouthed and argumentative Chef Gordon Ramsey. In each show, Gordon sets out to help a struggling restaurant; he always starts with a tour of the kitchen. He always finds problems and he always serves up a creative cocktail of words that would not be proper to say here (actually, they aren’t proper to say there either, but that’s another sermon). Gordon Ramsey can just cover his eyes and point and his finger would land on something gross and disgusting that needs to be fixed.

Paul was not foul-mouthed but he was argumentative and he, too, could cover his eyes and point and his finger would fall on an idol – something that needs to be fixed. Athens was an all-you can eat buffet of idols - any idol you could want or imagine. You could get into cars with a rabbit’s foot on the keychain, a star of David air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror, a bobblehead Buddha sitting on the dashboard, a Darwin “fish with feet” emblem on the trunk and a “Honk if you love Jesus” sticker on the bumper. They covered all the bases. You could get a god for love, for fertility, for weather, for agriculture, for the moon, for the stars, and for the sun. You name it, they had a god for it and that god showed up on the Athenian Idol Tour.

In one sense, these idols just represented the people’s hope that good things would come their way. Why wouldn’t you love gods who you hoped would give you sweet little babies and huge crops and fair weather and bright, bright sunshiny days – all good things? We could just

chalk this feast of idols up to a misguided city looking for love in all the wrong places. Trouble is, their idol extravaganza was not driven by LOVE of those gods, it was driven by FEAR of those gods- fear of the anger and vengeance that will blaze down from the heavens if the people fail to worship properly. That fear shines brightly in one altar, in particular. The altar to an unknown God, the altar that is built just case there is a god out there whom the people haven't yet heard of but who is powerful enough to make them sorry should they offend him or her.

Paul sees all of that on his Athenian Idol tour, and our scripture says that he was deeply distressed – other translations say he was outraged, exasperated, revolted. Athens had a synagogue and Paul was a Pharisee. How could any self-respecting synagogue with self-respecting Pharisees who supposedly taught of ONE God aid and abet so many others? It's not that they did not know better. Those of you who were in the Acts Bible study will remember that Dr. Mickey Eford described Athens as a university town, as it were – everybody there wanted to learn. Everybody could use big words. Everybody was a smarty pants. Everybody had multiple letters behind their names. Everybody loved hearing themselves talk about ideas and theology and life and ethics. They had a lot of information stuffed into their brains, but it made afraid.

So, they honored every god they'd ever learned about, and just in case they missed one, voila! The altar to the unknown god. That is what religion was to them – taking what they had learned and matching the right beliefs to the right gods so as not to offend, but they missed something. One preacher has said that “The parts of the Christian story that drew me into the church were not the believing parts but the beholding parts. Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy. Behold the Lamb of God. Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” Beholding is that thing you just can't build into an altar with your human hands. Beholding is that experience that comes down to saying, “I guess you just had to be there.” Beholding means you are present and that God has your full attention, not ideas about God, but God. There is a difference.

The Athenians knew all ABOUT gods, but they did not KNOW God– they did not behold God. Their gods were things to fear rather than someone to love. I'll confess - I don't think fear of God is always a bad thing. Sometimes, we approach God too casually with a wink and a nudge like God is our best bud and one of the guys, and yes, I know – I, too, believe in the God of love, and the God that Jesus showed us. But there's fear, and then there's fear. For me the difference is what I would be willing to drop to my two knees for. Behold. That identifies my Lord. It's hard to imagine bowing down to thieves or wrinkles. Fear. But what about the day when I find myself face to face with the Creator of heaven and earth? Fear. Behold.

I wonder if in a world of foul mouthed Gordon Ramseys and bullies and instant internet access and a profound interest in me, myself, and I, I wonder if we can learn to immerse ourselves into the power of behold. I wonder if we can find ways to live lives bowed down to a known God. Not bowed in fear. Not forced. Not lives bowed down to gods made of gold or made of steel or even made of our own reflection in a mirror. I am speaking of lives bowed down under intimacy with a living God. I'm speaking about lives bowed down under the weight of that love – much like the bloom of an Easter lily bowed in nothing but bloom and beauty.

It is not the norm. The norm is to stay upright while we pack everything we can into a day – to pay homage to our scheduling idols and our financial idols and our self-importance idols and to notice when things knock us off schedule or worry us or inconvenience us. That's normal. But, that normal does not make us better people, and in verses 26-28, Paul points his finger at those normal idols and says God did not create you for this. God allotted the time of your existence so that you will perhaps grope for him and find him. Behold. We start with

repentance and turning back to God. We start by paying attention. We start by remembering that not only can we know this God – in him we live and move and have our being.

If you're a fan of Garrison Keillor, you may remember the story he told about the traveling evangelist who came to Lake Wobegon and brought her road show to the Lutheran church. The show was called "Gospel Birds" and featured a re-enactment of the Noah's ark story performed by trained birds. Each bird was dressed up like a different animal and entered the ark two by two. And when they were all safely inside, four parakeets played tiny bells to the tune of the old hymn "His Eye is on the Sparrow." While the birds tinkled away the evangelist warbled, "I sing because I'm happy; / I sing because I'm free, / For his eye is on the sparrow, / And I know he watches me." And then she said to the congregation, "Now with every head bowed and every eye closed, I want you to sit and remember God's great love for us. And when one of our birds lands on your shoulder, if you feel the blessing in your heart, I ask you to stand up right where you are." Well, the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon are kind of like us, - they are a pretty reserved bunch. But they dutifully bowed their heads and closed their eyes. They'd done that plenty of times before, but this time, there was an air of excitement because at any moment a bird might land on their shoulder. So they were a little nervous. But they settled down, and as they sat and remembered, images came to mind of God in their lives, moments they'd forgotten when God's grace had been very real to them — the birth of a healthy baby, the rescue of a child from a troubled past, the music of laughter, the support of friends and family through divorce, or death, or job loss, or serious illness. They sat and thoughts floated up of a great love that did seem to abide in the world and hold them up as if by invisible hands, and more than that, a presence of grace for everybody. And as they sat in the pews and remembered these things, one by one each of them felt a slight, ever so slight, weight on his or her shoulder, as if someone had lightly tapped them. And, behold, one by one they did feel blessed. And, behold, one of them stood up, and then another stood up, and then another, and then another, and then...until everyone in the church was standing, touched and filled by this miraculous event." Behold.

I ask you: when have you experienced your capacity to behold; when have you been surprised by how deep your heart can go; when has your experience of God inspired you to stand up and be a better person? This morning I urge you to make more time to be in those places. I urge you to take time at the end of every day to think about God's great love for you – when did you feel it? In the music of a friend's laughter? In the satisfaction of a good day's work? In the smile of a cashier? Behold. As Paul says, our living God is not very far from each one of us. At any moment, grace and love can land on our shoulders. That is worth putting on full display so that when visitors poke around in our lives, they learn that while we may worry about lots of things: thieves, wrinkles, stinkiness, the only thing we fear is a life without knowing God. Behold, the choice is yours.