



“The Importance of Paul, the Importance of Athens”
Scripture – Acts 17:16-31
Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 30, 2024

Planes, trains, and automobiles – and buses, ferries, and even a catamaran. Earlier this month, Camilla and I embarked on an adventure. We took our grandsons, Matthew and Hayes, to Greece and to the ancient ruins of Ephesus in Turkey. We began our journey in Athens, the city where democracy was founded centuries before the time of Christ.

To reach our destination, we took a direct flight from the Philadelphia Airport to Athens, where we lodged in an air-conditioned apartment. Then, early one morning, before the temperature was stifling, we trekked up the hill to see the imposing Parthenon that sits atop the Acropolis and towers over the city. Although we had to deal with jet lag from our overnight flight, our journey to Athens was a breeze when compared with that of the Apostle Paul.

Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, traveled to various cities in Greece, teaching that Jesus was the Messiah and seeking converts to this new faith. In some locales they were welcomed; but not everywhere. In one city they were beaten with rods and imprisoned. Once freed, they went to Thessalonica where a few embraced Paul’s preaching. However, some became outraged. A mob set the city in an uproar because Paul declared that Jesus, not Caesar, was king. As a result, Paul and Silas fled for their lives under the cover of darkness.

They made it to Berea, but troubles followed them. Their opponents from Thessalonica tracked them down and stirred up the crowds in Berea. Paul’s supporters rushed him to the coast, where he set sail for Athens. Needless to say, his journey to Athens was a tad more challenging than ours.

Once we walked up the steep path and were atop the Acropolis, we marveled at the ancient ruins. Then, after snapping photos of the Propylaea, the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, and the ruins of the Temple of Athena, we began our descent. On the way down, we paid a visit to the Areopagus, the ancient Greek version of the Roman Senate. Its name is derived from the Greek God of War, “Ares,” and “pagos,” which means hill or rock. The Roman equivalent of Ares is Mars; thus, the site is sometimes referred to as Mars Hill. This is the physical location of this morning scripture reading. Paul stood in front of the Areopagus – or Mars Hill – when he addressed the Athenians. Of course, Camilla could not resist the opportunity,

so she had me stand on Mars Hill and snapped a photo of me striking a pose as if I were Paul preaching to the Athenians. She cajoled me into quoting Paul, so I chose 1 Corinthians 13 and Romans 8. It was all very dramatic!

Ancient Athens, regarded by scholars as the birthplace of democracy, was a mecca for major league thinkers. This was the hometown of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The Athenians were driven by intellectual prowess and philosophical pursuits. Could Paul win any converts to Christianity in such an environment? For that matter, could Paul even get a hearing before being beaten, imprisoned, or run out of town?

When Paul arrived in Athens, he was struck by the number of idols and shrines dedicated to various deities. Never had he seen a more unabashed violation of the commandment not to make any graven images. Athens was idol worship on steroids.

As was Paul's custom, he first went to a local synagogue. As a former Pharisee who now believed that Jesus was the Messiah, Paul could talk the language of Judaism. He knew the Hebrew law inside and out.

But at some point, Paul ventured out of the synagogue and took the daring move of striking up conversations with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. He did not receive an entirely receptive audience. Some called him a pretentious babbler. Others said he was a proclaimer of foreign divinities. They took Paul to the Areopagus and called on him to make his case.

Paul could have begun by chastising them for idolatry, but instead he began by noting common ground. He said, "Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. I went through your city and studied your objects of worship, and I came upon one altar with this inscription: 'To an unknown god.'" Paul tied scripture to Greek philosophical concepts. Demonstrating his knowledge of Greek culture, he quoted a couple of Greek poets. He quoted Epimenides, a poet from the sixth century Before the Common Era, who wrote: "For in him we live and move and have our being." And, then Aratus, a Stoic who had lived in the third century BCE, and said, "For we, too, are his offspring." With this, Paul built a bridge to Christianity. He said, "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals."

Paul built his address on the following theological points: 1) there is only one God who is the Creator of all that is; 2) pivot from idolatry and serve the one true God; and 3) all people will be judged by Christ whom God raised from the dead.

Paul was able to walk the fine line between recognizing points of agreement and watering down his message to the point that it became meaningless. He showed respect for their theological and philosophical pursuits, but still did not sacrifice his core conviction in the Creator of heaven and earth who is best known in Jesus.

Paul had faced dangerous situations already – beatings and imprisonment – so he knew that his teachings about Christ could land him in trouble. After all, this was the city in which Socrates was given the choice to recant his teachings or drink poison.

Paul was bold. It took tremendous courage to do what he did. Some rejected him outright, but Paul lived to preach another day and to spread the Christian message.

On *our* adventure, after Athens we went to Ephesus where Camilla again asked me to feign preaching. This time in the gigantic theatre where Paul and the Apostle John both preached. Our grandsons cheered – or laughed – I’m not sure which.

As we know, Paul would eventually be taken to Rome where the state would snuff out his light. But by then it was too late. Paul had already established the foundation of the Christian Church which would continue to spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

Following Jesus always calls for us to be compassionate. But sometimes it also beckons us to be courageous. Governments have always wanted to co-opt the church for its own purposes, and when the church has relented, society has suffered.

When Rodger Nishioka was a professor at Columbia Seminary, he took 14 of his students to Prague where the seminary had a long relationship with Saint Charles University. One day, Roger, and two of the Czech professors took the students out to lunch. Roger asked one of his students to offer the prayer for the meal. She asked everyone to join hands and bow their heads. As they were praying, the servers started bringing out their food and setting the plates down in front of them. While they were praying.

One of the servers noticed that the glass of one of the students was empty and she asked out loud in English, “Do you want more water?” He looked up and said, “Yes, thank you.”

She poured his water, and then asked if anyone else wanted water. While they were praying.

At the conclusion of the prayer, everyone said, “Amen,” and looked up. She was standing there, and in English, she said, “What were you doing?”

Roger smiled and said, “We were praying.”

She said, “What?” Then she proceeded to speak in Czech to one of the Czech professors. They carried on a lively conversation until she shrugged her shoulders and left.

The professor then said to the group, “Welcome to the most secular nation in Europe.”

Roger asked, “How did the Czech Republic become the most secular nation in Europe?” The professor said, “At a critical point, the church was focused more on her own survival, than on the Christian gospel.”

In 1948 after the devastation of World War II, the Communists came to power, and the Bishop of Prague made a fateful decision. He decided his highest priority was to preserve his churches, so he negotiated a deal with the Communists. He told them that if they would leave his churches alone, he would not criticize or oppose the Communist leadership. He agreed to cooperate, and in that moment, the church gave herself away and lost any moral authority.

The result of his decision became clear in 1989 when the communist government collapsed, and democracy was restored in Czechoslovakia. The church was no longer a relevant part of the society.

The Czech professor remembered the night in November, when the Communists left. He was standing in the largest square in the center of Prague. It was filled with thousands of people, dancing and laughing and singing – people of all ages.

The young people who had led the revolution were speaking. Then, the Archbishop of Prague, an elderly man who had not been seen in public for years went to the microphone. He told the crowd how glad he was for this day, and they cheered. Then he told the crowd that they should say the Lord's Prayer together. It had not been spoken in public in 40 years. The Archbishop began the prayer, but soon realized that no one in the crowd was praying with him. He stopped and asked them, "My children, why are you not praying the Lord's Prayer with me?" And a young man in the crowd yelled out, "Old man, we do not know who you are, and what you are saying!"

For 40 years, the church had been silent. And as a consequence, no one knew how to pray. The young woman who was serving them in the restaurant, genuinely asked what they were doing, because she had never seen anyone pray.¹

As we near our nation's celebration of Independence Day, it is essential to remember the importance of separation of church and state. History demonstrates that when the church becomes entangled with the government, the church loses its vital prophetic role to critique injustice and policies that undermine the welfare of some groups of people. When the church becomes too cozy with the government, it loses its moral authority to speak truth to power.

From the Inquisition to Nazi Germany to contemporary theocracies, the consequences of the church aligning with the government have been tragic. The church must fulfill its role as a moral compass giving voice to Christian principles whether they are in harmony with the state or not.

If the church is to be faithful to its calling, it must remind society of its responsibility to care for the least of these, to remind people of the destructive power of greed, to pursue justice for all, to care for God's creation, to call for an end of bombing that is killing innocents, and to promote the common good. It is only by remaining separate from the government that the church can genuinely fulfill its God-given role to be the light of the world.

NOTES

1. Rodger Nishioka, "On Being Salt and Light," November 12, 2023.

Independence Day Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, the Author of life and liberty, we turn to you to understand the proper place our nation is to have in our loyalties. Grant us wisdom and strength to serve you and this nation faithfully in the days that lie ahead.

Remind us of our duty to promote the general welfare, to secure the blessings of liberty for all, to see to it that justice and compassion reign from sea to shining sea, and that the bountiful resources of our land are not only thankfully received, but also generously shared with the whole human family.

Gracious God, if we are to be a light to other nations, show us what our nation must continue to become. Show us ways to unbind the chains which still limit the freedom of too many people. Enable us to win the fight against poverty which enslaves many in our country and around the world. Encourage us to overcome any prejudice based on race, sexual orientation, or religion.

God, we know that liberty is a precious gift that allows us to freely choose the path of Christ. May we never take freedom for granted and may we always be ready to work for the common good.

Loving God, we are very blessed to live in a land of liberty, help us to use our freedom to speak the truth, to promote justice for all and to respond with love toward our neighbor. These are the principles on which Jesus built his ministry, and these are the virtues you call us to embody.

Now, we join our voices together and pray the powerful words Jesus gave us to pray, saying, **“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”**