

“Preaching in Athens”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church — Indianapolis, Indiana
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Acts 17: 16-34

What’s the first thing you look at when the Sunday morning paper arrives? The comics? The sports section? The local news? For how many of you is it the advertisements? And of those ads, how many look for the technology ads – you know, Best Buy, HH Gregg, places like that? Yeah, I’m right there with you. Debbie always gets nervous when I start drooling over those ads, dreaming up what we “must” have next. I don’t know if God planned this, but that desire seems to be primarily inherent in the male species.

Scott Bader-Saye writes: *Novelty is alluring. The new always promises to surpass the old – and let’s face it, there is always a thrill when we get that new computer or those new clothes. But the new quickly becomes old, and so novelty creates an inexhaustible desire. Our love of novelty can even take on the appearance of a search for truth, when in fact it is only a form of distraction* (“To See and Not To See,” *Christian Century*, April 10-17, 2002: 17).

That, in a nutshell, is what the Athenians were doing. We read that they all spent their time “telling and hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). These people were obsessed with knowledge, and assumed that truth was found in the new. They were philosophers, thinkers, intellectuals who were the source of the greatest learning which had taken place in centuries. The Athenians used logic and reason to guide their lives, not religion and faith.

It is in this arena which Paul found himself seeking to preach the gospel. He had preached in many different parts of the Mediterranean, in many different situations. But this was new to him, and he had to approach the Athenians in a new, creative way. Yet all he needed was the invitation, and that is what they gave him: “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means” (17:19-20). That is all Paul needs to preach: a searching for something which might touch them in new ways. Thus begins one of the most creative sermons ever preached.

Paul was at first greatly disturbed by all the idols which permeated the Greek culture. Everywhere he looked, there was a statue, a shrine, a temple to the various gods of their mythology. Yet he turned this to his advantage when proclaiming his message. Instead of harping on their captivity to idols, he notes “how extremely religious [they] are in every way.” They are religious, at least in their outward symbols, and he compliments them on it. Then, he tailors their religious practices to his message: “As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar ‘To an

unknown god.” Among all the gods of Greek mythology, there must have been one which was not named, yet who deserved a statue which was worshiped.

Paul creatively sculpts the gospel to his audience through this unknown god. The one who is unknown to them is the God “who made the world and everything in it . . . who is Lord over heaven and earth.” This God “gives to mortals life and breath and all things . . . from one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth . . .” This God is the giver of life, the creator of all things around you. Why would he have to be cooped up into a hand-made statue or idol? This God “does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything.” Paul moves from praising the Athenians’ religious nature from the evidence of their idols, to describing the god who is represented by such an idol, to finally shattering the notion that God must have a manmade figure to make God real.

Paul then appeals to their desire and yearning for knowledge. God “allotted the times of [humans’] existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” God has given each of us the ability to think, to learn, to explore, to question all which is around us. The Athenians are great at that — they have discovered much about the natural order, and are always searching for answers to their questions. Paul reminds them, however, that all of their abilities are given by this unknown God, for that is how God wishes for it to be. We may search, long, grope for God, yet all the while he is never far away. For, as a Greek philosopher has said earlier, “In him we live and move and have our being.” This unknown God is all around us, in fact we are his offspring, the fruits of his labor. Indeed, this unknown God is not unknown at all — he has been made known to us through the “man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Not once does Paul mention the name of Jesus, or even the Jewish terms Yahweh or Jehovah. Yet it is clear he is being true to the Christian message, and ventures as far at the end as to preach the resurrection to the Athenians. Now, just because he has preached one of the most creative sermons ever to the Greeks does not mean he wins all of them over. Some scoffed at his message, especially concerning the resurrection of Jesus. But as we read, “some of them joined him and became believers.” What he had done, though, was share God’s love with a foreign group of people in a way that they would most easily understand and believe.

Before Paul preached this sermon, the Athenians did not know the living, triune God. After Paul preached at the Areopagus, God had become known in a real, true way. Before Paul shared the good news, the Athenians sought knowledge and truth but couldn’t see beyond their idols. After Paul shared the good news, his hearers understood who was the source of their knowledge and

truth. God became known that day in Athens.

Becoming known – that, for me, is a useful definition of evangelism. Our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is to do everything in our power to make God known in the lives of those around us. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are given creativity, passion, hospitality and compassion, all of which bring us into relationship with others. And it is in those relationships that we seek to till the soil, as it were, for the seeds of God’s love to grow and flourish in others’ hearts and minds.

That has been the driving force behind what we have unveiled today in our church’s mark. What is the most clear, consistent way to make known to our community who John Knox Presbyterian Church is, and thus, bring them to a relationship with God in Jesus Christ? How can we communicate to neighbors, strangers, friends and family what is our church’s identity?

This mark puts into an image and into words who we are as a church. We are an open congregation – welcoming others, seeking new ideas, not being satisfied with the status quo. We are a caring congregation – showing concern and compassion for one another, seeking wholeness where there is brokenness. We are a congregation which is committed to its community – partnering with others to serve our neighbors, giving of our time, talent and treasure to aid those in need, showing our commitment to this community by investing in this space.

And we are a congregation with depth, several layers of connections, and in which you will find many varieties of people. As you look at the circles, you will see many different things, much like the children shared earlier. I believe that represents us as the people of God: the Spirit is always moving to inspire us to see something new in ourselves and in one another. Over the next three weeks, we will continue to unpack this image and what lies behind it, and I hope we will engage one another in how this mark speaks to us as we seek to make God known in this world.

In response to my column in the newsletter this month, a member of John Knox wrote me this week: “Point well stated: ‘[W]e are seeking our community’s attention and **time** (emphasis added), and if we are not clear and consistent about how we are sharing our identity, then we simply become lost in the shuffle.’ There are hundreds of diversions available to people. Why should those be set aside in favor of a relationship with JKPC? That is a key marketing issue going forward. And it has to be answered in the 21st century. Especially as to the *time* component – the most cherished element in life, right after money” (Gary Shaw).

I couldn’t agree more. A logo or mark will not by itself make God known to others. It is one of many tools we have at our disposal as disciples – tools to open discussions, to introduce our church to strangers, to create curiosity, to enter into relationships with those who are seeking answers, who are seeking God. Ultimately, because we believe God is in this place and we are changed

creatures as a result, we then give others a reason to spend some of their valuable time with us, and in so doing, God becomes known to them.

“May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and began to teach . . . May the confidence of Christ be in us so we might share with others this new teaching, so that God might become known more fully and deeply in this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.