

*Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 1.v.2005, 10:30 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle/Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Acts 17: [16-21]22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; I Peter 3:13-22  
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2*

**J. J. !**

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and  
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

Focusing on today's Second Reading from Acts 17, I would like to read the five verses that immediately precede the account of the Apostle Paul on the Areopagus. You may wish to open your pew Bible and follow along, beginning at verse 16:

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons [i.e., the Gentile 'God-fearers'] and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling man want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked 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." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new..*

*-- Acts 17:16-21*

And what did Paul do *next*? Something important, something crucial in the history of Christianity and in the mission of the Church happens right there, between verse 21 and verse 22 of the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. It is something that *still* needs to happen

if we are to carry out Our Lord's great commission to proclaim God's good news of freedom and forgiveness to all people!

Paul was emphatically, we might even say fanatically upset with all this Gentile idolatry in the capital city of Græco-Roman religion and philosophy, "deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols." He had once been just as upset with what he judged to be the idolatry of Deacon Stephen of Jerusalem, assisting with the stoning of Stephen, later helping in the persecution of the earliest Christians. He had been convinced of his own rightness until that day when the Risen Christ Himself appeared to Paul with blinding splendor and the searing accusation, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?!"

That is what it had taken to get through to him, Saul the persecutor of the Church, to become Paul, the Apostle of Christ to the whole world, Jew and Gentile. What would it take now for Paul to convince *these* people, people of not only pagan faith but people also of learning and critical thought, that the story of the Crucified and Risen Savior was no idle tale? Where was the blinding light of Christ when Paul needed it in *that* moment?

In an instant, Paul changes his attitude. Instead of finding fault, instead of arguing against his hearers, he expresses an interest and a respect toward his hearers. Paul actually acknowledges the searching, hungry faith of his hearers, a faith so intent on finding God that they had built a shrine not only to the gods of their heritage but also to that God Whom they did *not* know, God beyond their understanding and their imagining, God beyond their religious mythology and their sacrifice, but still showing some respect toward that tradition and toward that experience. "Athenians," he addressed them, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way."

*There* was the light of Christ when and where Paul needed it to shine, a flash of insight and sheer genius as striking as his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus! Paul actually entered into *dialog* with humanity at the point of our ultimate concern. Paul addressed the universal human fear that we have been left alone, orphaned in the universe. And look what happened!: "Some of them joined him and became believers," Luke tells us, naming two of them, a man named Dionysius (Dennis) who either lived or spent a lot of time on

the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris, which would be a fine name for one of our new women's circles here at Saint James.

In so doing, Paul began a *conversation*, a dialog of faith, which has continued down the centuries, a dialog to which the Holy Spirit invites us as well. I am not sure if 'dialog' is the best way to describe the Christian mission at all times and in all places. In the wild and woolly days of Saint Walpurga in the 700s, for example, embracing the Gospel was often the alternative to meeting the sharp edge of a Christian axe or sword. To her credit, Princess Walpurga did not use either of those means to inspire young women of good families to serve Christ as missionary sisters with hers their Abbess, leaving her beloved Christian England for pagan and half-pagan Germany. It was her courage, her passion and her joy that attracted others, her dedication to a life of service among strange people in a strange land that won the hearts and minds of new Disciples of Jesus Christ. Two centuries before, in Ireland, Bishop Patrick and Abbess Brigid had proclaimed the Gospel with joy and with tremendous success by showing respect toward the spiritual life of the people of that place. In Ireland, within a single generation, a whole people embraced the

God Who promises to be with us forever through the Spirit of the Father and the Son, a conversion effected *without* the threat of axe or sword.

In the Church's mission to the non-Christian world today, *listening* as well as speaking, *conversation* about the deep concerns of faith and what it means to live a life of holiness characterizes the best Christian practice. This is the approach of our own Lutheran missionaries such as Viking and Marissa Dietrich in Senegal. The new Bishop of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI, has avowed his commitment to frank and opened dialog with the non-Christian members of the great family of world religions. Let us pray he means it, for never in the history of the world did the future of peace and of the human race so depend on overcoming conflict with conversation as it does today.

In our own practice of evangelism and in our conversation among ourselves, it should be no different. Listening, understanding, appreciating the insight and the perspective of the other is as important as speaking of the faith that is within us. These are two sides of the single coin of witness to God's mercy in our lives.

Our Congregation Council recently viewed a film on the every-member visit within the congregation. Usually associated with an annual pledge campaign, the every-member visit within each congregation pertains to stewardship in a much broader sense, the responsible, joyful and generous use of our gifts in God's service. What are we supposed to say? How are we supposed to speak to others so as not to offend them? These were questions we had. The film we borrowed from the Synod Resource Center answered those questions in an interesting way, in a way that would delight Saint Paul, it seems to me. The visitor in the film came not with a set speech or presentation, but rather with *questions* and with a keen *listening ear*, with genuine *interest* in the person being visited. Sharing our faith means *both* listening to the life and faith story of the other person *and* sharing our own experience of God.

Christians share with all human beings and with all religions the experience of living in a world in which the presence of God is *not* self-evident, of being born, living and dying in a world in which, on the contrary, it seems that God or any ultimate meaning to life or goodness in the universe may be profoundly absent. Our Lord

acknowledges that anxiety when He reassures the Disciples in today's Gospel that He will not leave them orphaned, that He will send them 'another Advocate,' the Holy Spirit Whose coming the Church will celebrate on the Day of Pentecost. *All* of us have asked and will ask again, as we look up at the night sky, or as we look deep into the dark night of the soul in times when joy and hope have fled, 'Are we alone? Is there a love that will speak out of the silence of existence? Do we really stand in the presence of a living God Who knows us and loves us, or do we stare into the blank randomness of an unknowing and uncaring abyss?'

Our dialog with the world can begin, again and again, by asking about that experience and also about how others have looked for and experienced signs of God's presence that give hope in the face of the realities of this world. Our conversation with those we know who either belong to other faith communities or to none at all can also begin with such asking and such listening, whether the occasion is the next wedding or funeral we attend, the next letter we write or receive or the next pause in the rhythm of work or recreation. We can have this conversation among ourselves, too, asking and hearing

what form the presence of God, the love of God, the mercy and the truth of God has taken in the lives of those who sit next to us, who commune before or after us. We can have this conversation, as we do, in Sunday School and Bible Study or other small groups, before and after worship or, someday soon I hope, in the every-member visit as we get to know one another better. And, as we listen to how the living God has been a living presence in the lives of others, then and there we will find the language to speak of the Crucified and Risen Savior in our lives as well. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

*S. D. G. !*