

Acts: Testifying in a Sea of Intellectuals
Sermon 3-11-18
By Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babblers 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.) ¹⁹So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” ²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so 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. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ ²⁹Since 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. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

³²When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³At that point Paul left them. ³⁴But

some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Message:

I'll be reading a story originally told by Steven J. Cole on bible.org titled "Reaching Intellectuals for Christ", "In 1941, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was invited to preach at Oxford University to a mostly student congregation. After the message, there was a question and answer time. Dr. Lloyd-Jones later learned that the first student to venture a question was studying law and was one of the leaders of the Oxford debating society. He got up and with all the polish of a debater, said that he had much enjoyed the sermon, but that it left one great difficulty or perplexity in his mind. He really could not see how the sermon, which he admitted was well constructed and well presented, might not equally well have been delivered to a congregation of farm laborers or anyone else. Then he sat down, as the crowd roared with laughter. Dr. Lloyd-Jones responded that he really could not see the questioner's difficulty. He admitted that he had regarded undergraduates and indeed graduates of Oxford University as being just ordinary common human clay and miserable sinners like everybody else, with precisely the same needs as farm laborers. And so, he said, he had preached as he had done quite deliberately. The students both laughed and cheered, and from then on, Dr. Lloyd-Jones had an attentive hearing (Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* [Zondervan], pp. 129-130). Dr. Lloyd-Jones (p. 128) quotes Martin Luther, who said, 'When I preach I regard neither doctors nor magistrates, of whom I have above forty in the congregation. I have all eyes on the servant maids and the children. And if the learned men are not well pleased with what they hear, well, the door is open.' Lloyd-Jones comments that if the learned man is not able to benefit from a message aimed at the servant girls, he is condemning himself as not being able to receive spiritual truth." For many of us, we may be intimidated by the thought of witnessing to intellectuals. Those whom our society might deem smarter. The intellectuals of our society, scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers and philosophers. And in our passage today, I imagine that Paul may have been intimidated also. You could say that Paul in Acts was mostly ministering to simple folk. People who were more open to the spiritual realm. But here in our passage, we see that Paul is testifying to a group of people who are 'smart.' People who may not be open to spirituality. People who are only open to what one may prove.

Athens was the home of the rational thinkers. The great Greek Philosophers came from Athens. Socrates, Plato, Pericles and for some time Aristotle lived in Athens. Socrates was one of the founders of Greek Philosophy and the thinking of the western world. The western world we know today, here in the U.S. One of Socrates common practices was to walk around the marketplace and talk with the

common folk arguing with them about his philosophy and thoughts. In our text we see Paul do the same thing, "...he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there." Paul first addressed the Jewish people in the synagogue and then moved his arguments among the common people in the marketplace. Like Socrates. But then the Epicureans and the Stoics recognize him as a 'babbler.' This is a mocking and insulting term. Paul's words can have no relevant and rational meaning to the intellects of Athens. But Paul knows their customs. Paul knows how to play by their 'rational' thinking rules. Epicureans, according to Biblical scholar Robert Wall are, "...materialists and believe that human life exists by natural chance. Avoidance of pain and suffering is the true aim of this life and not religious devotion...Epicureans were harsh critics of idolatry as well; their primary criticism of Athenian folk religion was that offering sacrifice to gods who are neither personal nor provident may be 'religious' but it is also non-rational: Impersonal deities cannot produce personal happiness." Do we see influences of this today in our society? That materialism produces happiness and helps us to avoid pain. Stoics, "...on the other hand, were hard rationalists, guided by their analytical observations and careful reasoning." Stoicism today has influenced many things. It influenced people who rationalized Christianity. Systematic theology is one area. It also influenced what today is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which Christine is very familiar with. That you can change someone by changing their behaviors and making rational choices rather than emotional ones. Just to give you a little more background, Socrates was mentor to Plato and Plato was a mentor to Aristotle. All of whom were way before Jesus' time on earth. Aristotle died in 322 BCE. So why all this dense explanation? Because Paul had to understand the influence of these philosophers, their way of thinking and how to work within the culture of Athens. The Stoics and Epicureans who called Paul a 'babbler' are the reigning authorities of the town. When the text says, 'they took him,' scholars are undecided if it means he was arrested or if he was merely escorted to the Areopagus or also known as 'Mars Hill.' According to Robert Wall, "The 'Areopagus' is the name given to an elevated, open-air site just to the west of the acropolis in Athens. The Areopagus also denotes the equivalent of a city assembly or council that would hear public debates and render verdicts. In this sense the Areopagus enjoys a role and authority similar to all the other councils of Acts." So here Paul has to prove that his belief in Jesus has legitimacy to be proclaimed in Athens. If the 'council' doesn't find it worthy, then Paul will be removed from Athens. In order for Athens to welcome a new "religion" Paul must establish three things, according to Robert Wall, "...(1) the sponsor must claim to represent a deity; (2) he must provide evidence that his deity is eager to reside in Athens; and

(3) the deity's residence in Athens must benefit Athenians as a mark of its goodwill."

So why does this all matter? Well...follow the scripture closely with me. After Paul is mocked for his 'babbling,' he establishes his authority by establishing a breach in their own rules in verse 23, "²³For 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.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Here, he establishes, that he is not just a 'babbling.' He proves his authority by showing them that they broke their first rule by allowing an altar to an 'unknown god.' How can you worship a deity that is unknown? That's irrational. Now, Paul has their attention. He's worth listening to. Instead of claiming an 'unknown god,' Paul proclaims the known God. Verse 24, "²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things." Paul's God, our God, is real. Paul establishes who he worships. That satisfies rule one. Rule two, Paul satisfies the eagerness of God to reside in Athens, "²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so 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. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' ²⁹Since 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." You see phrases like 'inhabit the whole earth' and 'In him we live...' So if God is in us, the God image, then God, by default, wants to reside in Athens too. Rule three, establish God's goodwill for Athens. Verse 30, "³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Some might not recognize this as goodwill at first, but as a threat. We know, though, that Paul is trying to tell the people that if you repent you will experience the same resurrection from death as Jesus did. Both in body and in Spirit.

Okay, so that was a pretty dense explanation of the text. But I hope that gives you a little more depth and importance of Paul's experience in Athens. One of the biggest things that Paul establishes in this text is that no matter your intellect, no matter your level of education and no matter whom your witnessing to, everybody needs Jesus. The lowliest person you can think of in our society needs Jesus. The smartest person, the most affluent person, our greatest leaders, need

Jesus. No one is absolved from needing the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. They may think they are smart. They may try to intimidate you with their intellect. But they still need Jesus.

When I think about this passage, an Ivy League School comes to mind. Imagine yourself in the town of this Ivy League School. Everyone seems to know everything about everything. You go to the grocery store and even the store cashiers have Bachelor's degrees. The Baristas at the coffee shops have Master's degrees. The waitress or waiter at restaurants are working on their PhD's. Everyone in the town is educated on some level. And here is where some of you may be, you want to proclaim the power of Jesus. His sacrifice on the cross for our sins. And yet you are intimidated. "How can I possibly proclaim this faith belief in Jesus to people that could easily outsmart me? They couldn't possibly believe me." You might say these things in your head. But I'm here to proclaim, just like Paul gave example to, that when you proclaim the power and witness of Jesus, that he will provide for you. That he will give you the words that may sound intelligible. And even if someone rejects what you say, they are not rejecting you, they are rejecting the one who sent you, Jesus Christ. As evidenced in our text, '...some scoffed..., ' others wanted to hear more on another day and others came to believe. You never know what may happen when you proclaim the story of Jesus Christ. When you proclaim God's action in your life.

When I was a Camp Counselor at Camp Hebron, I was leading a group of teenagers in a Bible Study. I don't remember exactly the content of the discussion, but what I do remember is this moment where one of the youth asked me a question that I didn't have an immediate answer. I was stumped. I remember in my moment of pause asking God, in my head, to provide me with an answer. And somehow, something intelligible came out of my mouth. It wasn't a trite answer. It wasn't something I heard a million times over. Somehow, some way, God gave me what I needed to say, to guide these youth through his thought-provoking question. I remember walking away from that experience being amazed at how God provides the words we need even when we don't have the words ourselves. Now, that's not an excuse to be lazy or to excuse study of the scriptures or exercising other spiritual disciplines. But it is to say that we can't possibly know everything about everything. And our reliance should be upon Jesus as we share our faith with others.

Just like in our earlier illustration at the beginning of the message, when we proclaim Jesus Christ it should be just as understandable to the 'lowliest' among us to the most 'intelligent' among us. Every person who has ever walked this earth, who is walking this earth and is going to walk this earth, needs the saving grace of Jesus Christ. What should you do to testify in a sea of intellectuals? Not too much different. It may help you, as it did Paul, to know as much as possible about the

context you are about to witness to, but it's not required. Your job is to "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." AND "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In order to avoid such vulnerable conversations and spiritual conversations, intellectuals may try to intimidate you with how smart they are. But that is usually just a defense mechanism against exploring the spiritual power of Jesus. That is not to say to try harder or to force the situation. But know that their defensiveness is not about you. They are not rejecting you. They are rejecting the one who sent you, Jesus. But I believe, Providence Church, with all my heart that if you step out into boldness. If you take the risk of sharing your faith story among intellectuals. If you love your neighbor as yourself. Then you will be amazed of what God does. Because those 'smart' people have a heart too. They have spirituality. They desire something more than what they can obtain purely with knowledge. They desire something that speaks deeply to their soul. In Paul's proclamation to Athens, "...some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them." It wasn't three thousand people coming to Christ that day, as on the day of Pentecost, but it is still worth the effort to proclaim the good news of Jesus even if just a few come to Christ. That's a few more than the Kingdom of God had before. That's a few more who will experience the life-changing, life-transforming, life-altering, power of Jesus Christ. That's a few more who will no longer feel the sting of guilt and sin. That's a few more who will die to the sinful self and be reborn in the grace and salvation of Jesus Christ. So, I implore you, Providence Church, don't be intimidated by the intellectuals. Proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ wherever you are. Proclaim God's story inside you. If Jesus is in you, you have the power of the almighty God with you who can do miraculous and powerful things. Praise be to God for all those who come to Jesus because of your response to God's call to witness to the masses and proclaim the good news of Jesus. For being obedient and faithful. For sharing the awesome grace that we all know in Jesus. Testify, Providence Church. Testify of God's deeds of power in your life. Live a life of boldness in Christ. Testify so that more and more people will know our awesome and mighty God. Amen.