

April 29, 2018 – Easter 5

Acts 17:16-34

Becoming Good News with the Powerful – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Paul continues his evangelization tour this week. He has left Silas and Timothy behind and gone on to Athens, the heart of Greek philosophy and politics. Once he arrives, Paul sees something he does not have a lot of experience with in Jerusalem – images of gods everywhere. Statues, paintings, trinkets all depicting the many gods of the Greek pantheon. Paul is distressed by all of this because it represents, as he tells the Athenians, *‘the times of human ignorance.’*

Paul comes to Athens at the dusk of their ascendance as the Herculean force of philosophy, democracy, freedom, and ideas in the world. The ideas and practices of Athens and the Greek Empire have lasted for eons. The Enlightenment began as a retrieval of many of the writings and ideas of the philosophers of Greece, and the American project was intended as a modified reinvention of the Athenian model of democracy. Ancient Athens is partially why we are a democratic republic and not a straight democracy. Athens was the seat of power for a huge empire, and when Paul was there, the Greeks still lived in the shadow and riches of that empire.

Freedom in ancient Greece had a few qualifying requirements – you had to be male, you had to own land, and you had to be native to the land. The free men of Athens would gather regularly to discuss the politics and philosophies of the day and their chosen place to have those discussions was a flat area called the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, which sat in the shadow of the Parthenon, the hall of the Gods.

This is where Paul gets invited to speak after he was overheard arguing in the streets about the idols of Athens. One thing we need to know about the Athenians of this time is this statement made by Luke, the author of the Book of Acts: *“Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17)*. When the powerful, the wealthy, and the free have achieved all they wish for, they get bored, and in their boredom, only the novel, the new, becomes interesting. Resurrected people and strange religions were new and novel for the free men of Athens.

Whereas last week we saw Paul’s message to the exploited was *“your freedom is first in God & Christ therefore everything is going to be okay”*, this week is very different. How Paul talks to people who are in power and have power over others is not the same as how he talks to people who have been or are being exploited.

How does a person talk to the powerful, free, wealthy, and bored? If you cared about something and were somehow lucky enough to be invited to speak at an event where the powerful, wealthy, free, and bored gathered, how would you present what you cared about to them? Say you were invited to Davos, or to a UN Security meeting. How would

you speak to the President of the United States or the Prime Minister of Britain or the Premier of China? How would you talk to Beyonce, or Bill Gates, or Kanye West, or Brad Pitt?

Paul answers this question when he writes in his first letter to the newly formed church to another seat of power in the ancient world, Corinth. There, he says,

*19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup>To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup>To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup>To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. <sup>23</sup>I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor)*

What this means to me is that, when you're talking with people in power (or who have power), you learn who you're talking to. You don't talk down to them, you don't talk across them, you talk WITH them, which means you've taken the time to learn something about who they are and their background – their culture, their history, their customs. Our conversation with the powerful isn't "*you're suffering and we can help*" or "*We share your suffering with you*". This is the language we use when speaking to those who have been exploited. When speaking to the free, the powerful, the wealthy, and the bored, from a Christian point of view, we have to figure out how to talk with them in such a way that they become willing to step into a different world view, even to the point of sacrificing their present world.

This is what Paul does when he goes to Mars Hill. Paul speaks the language of the gathered people at Mars Hill. He doesn't come in with all his guns blazing and tell them how wrong they are. Paul does what I call the "*3 o'clock in the morning*" talk. The "*3 o'clock in the morning*" talk deconstructs and indirectly assaults everything you believe about yourself or culture. The reason I call it the *3 o'clock in the morning talk* is because you don't realize what has been said to you until you wake up in the middle of the night and realize, in the case of our wealthy, bored, free, and powerful men in Athens, "*Hey, that guy today who talked about resurrection and all that stuff just mocked our religiosity and called us ignorant!*"

For the "*3 o'clock in the morning*" talk to work, a person has to be confident about the subject upon which they speak. The speaker needs to be knowledgeable about what the people think and know as well. Paul in his short speech at Mars Hill does this. He has paid attention to the Greek religion because he talks about the Athenians' statue to the unknown god. And then Paul goes further. He has familiarized himself with their revered philosophers and poets – Epimenides and Aratus. Epimenides was an influence on Epicureus. Epimenides was also the creator of the Cretan paradox, which states, "*I am a Cretan, and all Cretans are liars*". Aratus was influenced by the Stoics, was a poet

of the day, and circulated among the famous and influential of the area. It is also likely Paul was familiar with Sappho, the racy, gender-bending poet of love, because of the way he has structured his argument. Paul knows the poetry and philosophers of the people to whom he speaks.

The speaker who is going for the “*3 o’clock in the morning*” effect needs to have a clear purpose as well. I think Paul’s intention with the powerful, wealthy, free, and bored of Athens was to create a constant struggle in their minds. Whenever they thought of those poets and the ideas of God and gods, they would from now on think of his speech at Mars Hill. Whenever the Athenians thought of Paul’s speech, they would have to unravel and deconstruct centuries of thought. It is quite insidious and revolutionary. And it is a powerful example of how to talk to the powerful, wealthy, free, and bored in any culture.

This is Jazz Sunday and it is appropriate this is the reading for the day, because jazz began as a music of resistance in the African-American communities in Louisiana. Music is the universal language and is spoken across borders and around the world in a way that all people can understand. Jazz comes out of the blues tradition and, like blues, is a wholly American creation. But what jazz does is universal. Jazz takes the new sound of the blues and applies the sound to structured, classical music, and in doing so, completely deconstructs the history of music. In freeing music from the constraints of history, jazz became the flowing river that has received influence from numerous tributaries – Appalachian music, gospel songs, ragtime in America, and then the river rapidly expanded to include music from all over the world, especially tributaries from West Africa, Cuba, Latin America, and then Europe.

Jazz was never deliberately revolutionary – it didn’t have to be. Even so, trumpeter Miles Davis and saxophonist Ornette Coleman were considered the soundtrack of the Civil Rights movement – that is partially why they are considered the founders of what is known as ‘free jazz’. Jazz was never deliberately subversive, but jazz trumpeter Hugh Masekela, who just died a few months ago, was the anthem writer for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Jazz is the universal music of freedom, because it frees music from the restriction of structure from the past, even while acknowledging that past. This is how jazz also communicates with the powerful in a way that deconstructs and sometimes even mocks the music of the powerful, like Paul does with the Athenians at Mars Hill.

How we talk about the faith, the universal love of God, and knowing who we are talking with, is of great importance. The language we use with the slave girl and the jailer in Philippi is not the same language we use with the free, wealthy, bored, powerful people on Mars Hill. Often, action means very little to the powerful, unless they are directly responsible for it. Often, even the arts of persuasion and rhetoric are not particularly influential with the free and the wealthy, because they have access to everything. Often, the thing we are passionate about makes everything new for us, but seems like old news to the bored, the ones seeking the next new thing.

And so to become good news with the powerful means we must be like Paul and put our faith and belief out there confidently, with no apology. Paul knows deeply that faith in Christ is the universal language of foolishness to the Gentiles, the Greeks. The universal language of Christ's freedom, God's love and provision, the ways in which God makes all things new, cannot work by classy, sophisticated political and philosophical arguments. Instead, that Resurrection language works through us by the power of the Holy Spirit and slowly deconstructs and unwinds the ancient ways of thinking and believing that keep us from being truly free and continually engaged with God's work of bringing the entire world into God's embrace. If done well, it will awaken the bored, wealthy, free, and powerful late at night, and they will either want to hear more, or, like some of the Athenians who heard Paul's message, will follow the Christian Way with us. And of course, some will call us foolish.

That shouldn't stop us all from becoming good news with and for the powerful by being like Paul and singing our song of faith, with confidence and passion. Let us trust that the Holy Spirit will reorient, remake, and restore the people to whom we speak into the free people of God. And may we be transformed as well by the hearing of the Word of the Lord.

*Amen.*