

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Year A

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells His disciples that, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Throughout this time on the night before He died, Jesus spends a lot of time telling His followers that He will be leaving them, but encouraging them to continue the work He had begun. One of the commands Jesus gave His followers, just prior to the Ascension, was to take the message of the Kingdom of God to all nations. Jesus promises them another Advocate who will be with them. How do they put these requests into action after the Ascension?

The Book of Acts does not give a detailed account of the actions of the followers of Jesus, but it does give us a sense of how they fulfilled His commands. In the reading today, we find Paul in Athens alone. He has left Timothy behind to care for one of the churches he had founded as he continued his journey through Greece. Paul is dismayed by the display of idol worship in Athens. But, beyond just looking at all of the statues and being disgusted at what they represent, Paul reads the inscriptions to discover the breadth of the religiosity of the Athenians. Using his knowledge of their philosophers, Paul addresses the people.

Paul knows that it is hazardous to introduce a foreign God to these people. He is aware of their laws and their teachings. Therefore, he uses the information he has gathered during his tour of the city to formulate a message that will appeal to his audience. In a sense, he tailors his sermon to fit the spirit of the people he is trying to reach. Thus, Paul speaks of the altar to “an unknown god” that he has seen. The Athenians were so careful not to insult any deity that they covered their bases by having this altar, just in case they missed some god. Paul uses this as a springboard for his message.

Paul is careful not to challenge the people by introducing a concept totally foreign to them, but uses the words of their own philosophers to introduce Jesus and the Creator God. When the great philosopher, Socrates, addressed this crowd generations earlier, the verdict was death, because Socrates had introduced new gods. By using this inscription on the altar, Paul was able to avoid that pitfall. He further explained himself by quoting their poets when he said, “In him we live and move and have our being” and by asserting that we are all children of God. Paul did not come up with these sayings – it was an Athenian poet who first wrote this, but Paul used it to explain our relationship with God.

How does this help us as we talk to the people we meet? First, we need to follow the example of Paul and really pay attention to the details of what people around us are saying. If Paul had not noticed the inscription on that altar, he might have set himself up to follow Socrates. But, that little detail opened a door. He further strengthened his case by utilizing the ideas of their culture. He acknowledged who they were and what they believed before introducing the resurrected Jesus to them. Paul was also bold in his proclamation that Jesus was the answer they were

looking for in their worship of so many idols. While that could have led to his death, he said what he truly believed, regardless of the consequences.

As we attempt to share our story with those we meet, we need to take the same type of approach as Paul did. We need to begin where our audience is. We need to speak from their beliefs, not judgmentally, but through the love God has placed in us for our neighbors. We can speak to the many idols that permeate our culture – money, power, sex, to name a few – and show that God is the final answer to what people seek. St. Augustine stated that each person has a God-shaped hole in their heart. Only God can fill that void. As we are faithful in our sharing of what Jesus has done for us, we can offer the solution that people need.

Paul did not try to defeat the idolatry of the Athenians, but celebrated the creativity of the people in their art, architecture, and philosophy as a gift from the God who introduced us to Christ. We also need to celebrate the wonders that fill our lives and declare that the Creator of all we see is the same God who sent Jesus to show us how to love all mankind.