

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

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### “How to Speak Religiously in Athens”

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#### Acts 17:16-34

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>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.) <sup>19</sup>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? <sup>20</sup>It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ <sup>21</sup>Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup>For 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. <sup>24</sup>The 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, <sup>25</sup>nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup>From 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, <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>For “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.”

<sup>29</sup>Since 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. <sup>30</sup>While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because 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.’

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ <sup>33</sup>At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup>But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

My former secretary in Salt Lake City sent me one of those email forwards about the peculiarities of life in Utah. I suppose there is such a list for every state but if I read from the Michigan one perhaps we wouldn't think it was funny. For example in Utah, you eat your French fries not with ketchup but with a secret mixture called fry sauce. In Utah, those who drink Coca-Cola usually do so from a brown paper bag. In Utah you know how to make a concoction called funeral potatoes and you learn how to put carrots and peas and broccoli into green jello. In Utah you know that "U" and "Y" are not just letters but the major universities whose rivalry is intense and bitter. In Utah you soon learn the difference between a "steak" house and a "stake" house. In Utah you hear the expression, "Oh my heck!" several times a day. In Utah, schools stay open even if two feet of snow falls overnight. In Utah, 30% humidity feels unbearably muggy. And in Utah, Ronald Reagan was considered a liberal and Democrats always come in third place, unless a zoo animal is running, then they come in fourth. Please keep those things in mind if you ever decide to visit Utah. You'll want to be able to "speak the language."

Tim Wright, in his book *Unfinished Evangelism*, writes about a cowboy who visited church for the very first time in his life. He described the experience to a friend. He said, "I rode up on my horse and tied it up by a tree in the corral." The friend replied, "You don't mean a corral. You mean the parking lot." "I don't know what they called it," the cowboy continued. "But then I went through the main gate." The friends said, "You don't mean the main gate. You mean the front door." The cowboy went on, "Well anyway, a couple of them there fellers took me down the chute." His friend interrupted again. "Those were the ushers and that wasn't a chute, it was the center aisle." The cowboy nodded, "Yeah, I guess that's what they

called it. Anyway, these fellers put me in one of those little box stalls." The friend commented, "You don't mean a box stall. You mean a pew!" The cowboy looked surprised. "Pew? Yeah! Now I remember. Pew. That is what the lady said when I sat down beside her."

Sometimes it seems as if even those who speak the same language, speak different languages. Regional, cultural, age, and professional peculiarities breed strange expressions of communication. Sometimes it seems as if the people of faith have to speak a different language that the rest of the world. We are called to talk of good news, to share of what our experience of faith means for our lives. Yet it is always tough to speak seriously of faith matters outside of church activity. William F. Buckley once noted that you might be able to mention religion at a fancy dinner party once, but if you bring the subject up twice in one evening, you will not be invited back. We want to be tolerant of the beliefs of others. We don't want to be misunderstood. We certainly don't want to come across as some kind of fanatic, bore, or freak.

It used to be easy. We were all preaching to the choir or singing the same song in the same key. There was a time, perhaps forty or fifty years ago, when Christian witness meant calling people back to something they already knew. It was retelling an old story that was most familiar. Sadly, that is no longer the case. We live in a world where our experience of the faith community is not a common one. Even within our church, especially a Congregational church, faith experience and thus the language of faith is different for us all. We come from different backgrounds and different theological perspectives.

We also live in a world where observation is prized over revelation.

People look at everything that goes on around us and can easily understand cells that divide, masses of matter, and swirling gases. When someone wants a definitive answer, they search for it on the internet. We all know the Wikipedia wouldn't lie don't we? Yet as people of faith we point to a place where observation alone does little good, a path where mystery and power of spirit are embraced.

How can we talk about our faith to a world and culture that seems to speak or at least hear a different language? In an environment with a million choices, it is vitally important to articulate ways in which Christianity speaks with hope from the surrounding cacophony. We need to talk about how we are called to be set apart from those who would worship other gods and we need to decide where we have common ground with the prevailing culture. We must speak and we must learn to speak religiously.

The apostle Paul was in Athens, the center of the Greek world of his day. It was an academic and intellectual haven, a place where all ideas could be expressed, heard, and discussed. Indeed the people of Athens seemed to have had a limitless ability to absorb all ideas and belief systems, baptizing all truth as relative, tolerating all religion as part of that which was truth.

Into this scene stepped Paul, one of the early "Great Communicators," a man who would enter into theological discussion with anyone wherever he might find himself. Paul began his speech in a most interesting way. He said he knew that the Athenians were not closed minded. He looked at the altars and idols set up on the streets. He said, "I can see that all of you are a very religious people." Those listening must have wondered if Paul was being sarcastic or condescending. But indeed the people of Athens were very religious. They worshipped everything

they found: gold, silver, wood, money, their bodies- anything. They had even erected a shrine to an unknown god, just in case they had neglected the worship of somebody or something.

Paul was very wise. He understood that the chief problem in Athens was not a lack of belief in gods or a god, rather it was a belief in false gods. They were a religious people but a searching people. They were looking for something in which to believe. Paul used the strategy of starting where people were, with their own experience, and then nudging them toward where he wanted them to be.

Perhaps the first step in our speaking religiously is to gain the understanding that Paul had. Despite appearances and despite our assumptions, we must recognize that we live in a religious world. Everyone throws themselves before the altar of some god or gods. Like the Athenians, our culture worships money, work, sex, country, power, possession, celebrity, sports, and pleasure. I recall an interview that Bill Moyers once had with *Star Wars* producer George Lucas. Lucas said that he found he was living in a religious time. He tried to take issues of religion and distill them into a more modern and easily accessible content. Lucas admitted that he put the idea of "the force" into his films to try and awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people. He wanted them to begin to ask questions about mystery. Like George Lucas, and like the apostle Paul, perhaps we first need to recognize that we live in a time in which it is perfectly proper to speak about religion. People today are asking spiritual questions. While there may be much confusion, people today are more open to connecting with mystery and transcendence. If we look around at the gods and idols that surround us, we can see them as proof of a need for faith rather than enemies of the need for faith.

Secondly, like Paul we need to understand that people really don't mind hearing about religion. But they want to hear in a way that speaks their language and that they will understand. Famed preacher Tex Sample tells of being in a Memphis bus station and suddenly being confronted by some zealous missionaries concerned about his salvation. They asked if he knew whether or not he was going to heaven or hell. He said that he thought he was going to Chattanooga.

Something other than the sharing of absolutes is needed in our religious talk. Paul took the risk of asserting the resurrection, an event completely contrary to how his listeners perceived the world working. New life, eternal life in the face of death and darkness was an eye-opening contrast. We might want to use a similar tactic, speaking of the power of God which runs contrary to the wisdom of the world that has left people without hope. We can be givers within a culture that prizes possession and receiving. We can be peacemakers in a world of violence, where force equals power. We can be humble while those around us scramble to achieve only victory. We can find joy in less while others futilely search for more. We can speak, not to prove our correctness or the wrongs of others, but to support and encourage. We can live as people of God so that others will find God in what we say and do. We can live pointing to the things that make the life of a Christian different and more purposeful than the life of one who has not embraced the path of Christ.

Finally, like Paul, we must keep speaking religiously even when we might get discouraged. I once asked a medical salesperson who he could keep making daily calls to physicians when a great majority of them would never buy his product. He told me that he had learned to view the goal of his job as

product presentation not product sales. He could control the message but not the response. Christian proclamation is not to be judged merely by its success in winning approving responses. We cannot compel anyone to believe as we do, nor should we want to. Paul recognized that many in the so-called logical world of many gods would find his message silly. Only two people in the crowd that day heard it well enough to respond positively. But he spoke of it nevertheless, knowing that faith is a gift from God and that faith sometimes comes only in nothing less than a miracle.

How do we speak religiously in the Athens that is our world? We speak by knowing that questions are being asked. We speak using the language of our listeners. We speak trying to understand the world embodied in that language. We speak boldly, calling into question the culture's understanding of reality. We speak at the risk of rejection, realizing that it is a work of God not our own competency. We speak, for we are the voice of the Gospel. We are good news to those who can and will listen. We speak because our words and our actions may be the most important way that God speaks to our world today.