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Easter VI
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Text: Acts 17:16 – 31
Title: Changes

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Last week we were introduced to a young man named Saul. He was a part of the Jewish Council in Jerusalem, and a staunch supporter of their actions against the followers of Jesus. In his own words, Saul was a faithful Jew “...circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Young Saul stood by as a witness to the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and we are told that he “...approved of his execution.” That is the Bible’s introduction to Saul, the man who was converted to Christianity by Jesus Christ, Himself on the road to Damascus. After that encounter with the Savior, Saul changed his name to Paul, and began spreading the Christian Gospel everywhere he went, using his education as a Pharisee to convince his fellow Jews that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

That’s what Paul was doing in this week’s reading from Acts, sharing the Christian faith on another journey. But there was something else going on at this point in Paul’s life. He was now a man on the run. The man who helped to begin the persecution of the Christian Church was now the target of persecution himself. Before arriving in Athens to hide out, Paul had been in the city of Thessalonica proclaiming the Gospel in the synagogue there, and the Holy Spirit had used him to show the Jews who were living there that Jesus truly is the long-awaited Messiah who had to suffer and die for the sins of all people. Some of the Jews there even joined a new Christian church along with a significant number of Greeks and even some of the more prominent women as well. But then the trouble started.

Many of the Jews who refused to listen to Paul's reasoned arguments began to stir up the people. They organized some hired thugs, and began to incite a riot in the city. They managed to cause a big disturbance, and finally targeted the house of Jason where Paul and his companions had been staying while visiting the city. Fortunately, they managed to get out of the house before the mob arrived, and only Jason and a few others were brought before the city officials. They accused Paul and the new Christians of treason for supporting Jesus over Ceasar, the same charge that was put on the cross of Jesus: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

Paul and his companions, Silas and Timothy, left Thessalonica as the trouble was coming to a head, and in the middle of the night they moved on to the next city of Berea. Paul was still there to preach and teach about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and so he went into the Jewish synagogue just like he did whenever he entered a new town. It didn't matter to Paul that he had been thrown out of Thessalonica for doing this same thing. He wasn't going to be stopped from his mission.

The blatant hostility that he faced in Thessalonica wasn't a factor in Berea, and when he taught them about the Gospel they took the time to listen to what he had to say. They were eager for Paul's Gospel message, and would take the time to examine the Scriptures to see if the Word supported Paul's claims. That was what it took to convert many of them as well as many prominent Greek men and women. Everything was going well in Berea until the Jews from Thessalonica came, and they began stirring up trouble again.

So, Paul had to run, again, and with the help of some local Christians he moved on to Athens. All Paul had to do was lay low until Silas and Timothy got there, and then they could move on to continue their missionary work. But laying low was never something that Paul was

good at. Even though he had been forced to leave the past two cities that he had preached in, Paul just couldn't resist proclaiming the Gospel once again in the city of Athens.

Today's reading from Acts 17 opens at this point of Paul's ministry. He's waiting for his companions to join him in Athens, and as he takes in the city he is infuriated by all the idols that he finds there. He knows he can't just leave the city to worship all of these false gods without giving them the chance to hear about the one true God who has given the Gospel for all people. Paul once again begins to tell people who will listen about who Jesus Christ is and what He has done for all people. And, in keeping with his usual mode of operation, he begins by reasoning with the Jews in the local synagogue, but he also takes advantage of the size of Athens and talks with people out in the marketplace as well.

It's not long before Paul draws the attention of two groups of philosophers in Athens, the Epicureans and the Stoics. The first group, the Epicureans, emphasized the pursuit of a pleasurable life in whatever way you could find it. The Stoics stressed the rational order of the natural world, and they urged people to simply accept their fated place within it. These two groups hear Paul's message about Jesus and the resurrection, and they decide to bring him to the Areopagus or the temple of the god of war, Ares. In this place, the philosophers would spend their time discussing different ideas, especially new ones, in a pursuit of wisdom and truth. To a Greek and Roman mind, wisdom and truth were to be pursued over everything else. There was nothing that was more important for a cultured citizen than to be properly educated because a slave was only taught enough to do his or her job, nothing else.

As Paul stands before the philosophers in the Areopagus, these descendants of the schools of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, give him the floor to proclaim the Gospel, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed

the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.'

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring.'

“Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Paul could very easily be talking to our nation today. We are a truly spiritual country, just like the city of Athens was “...in every way...very religious.” They even had an altar that was dedicated “To the unknown god.” They were sure to cover all of their bases by having this specific altar erected, but Paul warns that the time for all of that is over.

It's very much like what people want to believe about religion today. They want to claim that all religions are the same, and that no one religion is better than another. They believe that any religion will save a person and only the most evil people will be condemned to hell if any people will be condemned. It sounds good. It's what helps them to cover all the bases, and is essentially the same idea as erecting an altar to the unknown god. It also makes living a life of

faith so much simpler when you don't have to worry about what doctrine of God is right and what is wrong.

Idolatry is so much easier than faithfulness to the one true God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Being faithful means loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and that doesn't allow you to make a priority of anything or anyone over your relationship with Him. Being faithful also requires you to put others needs ahead of your own in order to love your neighbor as yourself. It's much easier to convince yourself that God is the way that you want Him to be instead of the way that He has revealed Himself to be in His Word, and our sinful nature works hard to persuade us to think up our own god in our own image disguised as the One True God, instead of us being made in His image.

Paul proclaims a warning of judgement to the philosophers, but there is mercy promised as well. He is showing those at the Areopagus – and us as well – that the so-called unknown God has revealed Himself to all people in a real and meaningful way. God the Father has sent His only Son to show us who He is and to show us the love He has for us. Jesus also tells us this very thing in today's Gospel reading with His description of the Father and His plans to send the Holy Spirit. This love, His love, is a love that never ends. It is a love that is sealed by His resurrection from the dead which Paul points to as the assurance of all God's promises to us.

In Jesus, God has come to His people in a very real way. He entered into His creation to save His people. No other religion makes that claim, and no other religion claims a sacrifice made by the Creator for His Creation. Every other religion tries to teach that you must move closer to God, but through Christ we learn that God comes to us instead. God is the one who comes to you, and He will come again. He promised it, and because He is risen we can be sure it will happen just as He said. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen!