

Acts 17:22-34  
April 27, 2008

South Plains  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter

The Court of Public Opinion  
A first person sermon

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Demos, a citizen of Athens. Given the fact that we are a great distance from Athens, and somewhat removed from civilization, perhaps it would be appropriate to elaborate. "To be an Athenian, either by birth, marriage, adoption, or even one one's mother's side, is an introduction to any" city in the Empire. I tell you this not to brag, but to make clear that the story I am about to relate deserves your attention as citizens of integrity. For I have heard that you are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it may lead. This is truth worth following.

Yesterday in Athens a most remarkable thing happened. A Jew by the name of Paul challenged the religion of our people. Now, you might say, "What is remarkable about that? Religionists are always seeking new adherents to their particular approach to heaven." This challenge was different in several ways. It was different

- in the evidence this Jew brought forward;
- in the quality of his argument;
- in the grace with which he argued; and
- in the results that followed.

Let me start with the results. This was no crowd-pleasing, rabble-rousing appeal to the lowest common denominator of human emotion. In fact, only two converts of any consequence have been counted, although I find myself also strangely moved to consider these things further. A woman by the name of Demaris has declared herself a Christian. Her I know only by her reputation as a person of means among the merchant class in the marketplace. The other convert, however, it none other than (are you ready for this?) Dionysius the Areopagite.

As you might guess, my family has been prominent in the affairs of Athens for many years. One delightful benefit of this history has been my friendship with Dionysius the Areopagite.

What? From the expression on your faces I see that you are not impressed by his position. I forget how far removed you must feel from the cultural advantages of Athens, living as you do in the countryside. Let me explain. There are only nine Areopagites in Athens. They are appointed for life to serve as judges in the most serious cases of misconduct that threaten our fair city. The reputation of this supreme court for fairness is legendary. Indeed, the name "Areopagus" comes from the ancient history of this hill. The god Ares, or as the Romans call him "Mars," was tried for murder on this very spot. Ever since that time, this hill has been the site of the most solemn deliberations when the truth of a matter requires the best minds of the city. The nine Areopagites

meet here on Mars Hill to hear evidence and to render a verdict. It has been so for 500 years. Many believe that it is only the careful judgments of the Areopagus that keep democracy in Athens from descending into mob rule.

When the honorable Dionysius converted to Christianity yesterday on the basis of Paul's presentation, word spread through the city like wildfire. His opinion is respected by everyone for fairness and wisdom. He has one of the best minds in Achaia, maybe in the Empire. (Did I tell you that he often seeks me out for good conversation?) Anyway the most startling result of Paul's argument was the conversion of Dionysius. As Dionysius goes, so goes the city, I always say.

The second remarkable thing about this even is the quality of Paul's argument. As a personal friend of the great Dionysius, I asked him, "Why did you give up your old ways, turning your back on the gods of your ancestors in favor of this new God?" He looked at my quizzically, as if surprised, and answered with a question of his own. "Were you not impressed, Demos, with the quality of that speech? With the learning that he marshaled to make his point?"

Ah, well. I suppose this is why I could never aspire to the court of Areopagus. But, once my friends brought it up, I immediately saw what he meant by a quality argument. This Paul had done his research. He had taken the trouble to examine our altars to the gods

we worship. He knows our poets well enough to quote Aratus and Epimenides. (I would have preferred to hear him quote the more popular Homer, but each to his own taste) Above all, he followed the same line of reasoning proposed by our own philosophers: namely that the God who created heaven and earth, the Lord who rules all things, does not need our shrines and altars. A truly great God gives life and breath to every creature.

Paul departed from our philosophers by urging us to believe in one God only. But, that is minor point since everyone knows there are many gods; and some are not worth bothering about while others require more respect.

In addition to the quality of his argument, the other reason that persuaded Dionysius was the grace with which this Jew spoke. Here was a man of refinement and tact. As someone else has said, Paul proclaimed his message with a spirit of respect and not arrogance, He had a tone of invitation, not insistence, relatedness and not rejection of our customs (Nanette Sawyer on The Blog of The Christian Century).

When he spoke first in the marketplace, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Others made fun, calling him a babblers of foreign divinities. During all this time, he did not lose his temper once. Finally, the more informed listeners brought him from the noisy marketplace to the Areopagus. A lesser man would have been intimidated by these surroundings which are so celebrated in lore and legend by the

greatest writers of our culture. But, Paul did not hesitate to appeal with learning and grace to the nine distinguished Areopagites.

The most memorably part of his argument, and the most remarkable was the final piece of evidence he brought forward. Every cultured and caring person in Athens see that the quality of our civilization is under attack by the influence of Rome. Ignorance governs the lives of so many residents of the city. The old manners and customs that restrained immorality have given way to coarse displays and a certain roughness even in the best neighborhoods. Paul picked up on this tendency and exploited it by announcing what many of us have feared. A day of reckoning is at hand. A day is coming, he said, when this God “will have the world judged in righteousness.” This is a warning we all can take to heart, especially in the court of justice on Areopagus. Surely, it is a warning that even you can heed in your beautiful little building nestled in the serenity of these hills.

Most importantly, judgment will be rendered on our way of life according to Paul, by a man raised from the dead. In itself, the prospect of judgment would have caught our attention. But, added to the awfulness of judgment is the claim that the judge will come back from the dead. Now, here’s the thing. Paul is not the only one to make this claim. The story of Jesus of Nazareth, another Jew, has made it’s way around the world.

Like Paul, this Jew Jesus was a persuasive speaker, a learned and skillful rhetorician. He was a good man by Athenian standards and beloved by his people. When he called for more righteousness than people saw in their religious leaders, those leaders became frightened. When his followers acclaimed him a king, his enemies panicked. Finally the Jewish leaders and the Roman government conspired to execute him on a trumped up charge of blasphemy and sedition. It was typical Roman cupidity.

It is this Jesus who is said to have been raised from the dead. And, it is this Jesus who is said to be the final judge of all the world. When Dionysius, a judge of no small stature himself, heard this message, he was moved to become a follower of Jesus. Is that not the most remarkable thing you have ever heard? Would you not have been moved yourself? That is a question to ponder over your porridge, or whatever you people eat in the country.

Now, I must decide what to do. My friend has become a Christian. I do not know which way to turn. I have always tried to be tolerant of every religion and to keep an open mind. But, the force of Paul’s argument presses me to give up the pretence of any other religion. I know that our old gods have not served us well in recent times. I fear we are hurtling downhill, faster and faster toward some terrible judgment.

Ah well! We have heard these warnings before.