

Sermon Title: Areopagus

Text: Acts 17:16-32; John 14:15-27

By: Rev. Terry Carty

Date: 05-29-11

Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church

Season: Sixth Sunday of Easter; Memorial Day weekend

Main Message: Focus life on Jesus who is the perfect image of the one true God.

-----  
Read John 14:23.

Then carefully read Acts 17:16-32 as a story. Paul uses commonly accepted Hebrew and Greek understandings of the unnamed god and points them directly to the God of the Jews and Christians. This is a form of oratory very familiar with the citizens and visitors to Athens.

The south and the middle states must have made the weather Gods angry! What other explanation could a spiritual people reach? I am sure that you spent Friday burning incense in front of your sun god statue in your garden. Otherwise how could the weather forecast be so good for tomorrow's holiday and the rest of the week?

That is the way the majority of the people of pre-Christian Athens thought when Paul spent a week there waiting for his traveling companions to join him. He did a lot of walking around and looking to try to understand the Athenian attraction to worship of various images.

I titled today's sermon simply "Areopagus" for one reason: I really like to say Areopagus. It makes me kinda laugh like "Snuffleupagus" does :) The Areopagus is the name of both a place and of a group of people. The place is where people of Athens would gather to talk about philosophical things. They loved to discuss and debate matters of life and religion. The group of people was a court of public thought that determined orthodoxy. Pretty convenient that people could invite those with innovative ideas to a discussion and then take them to court if they don't like what they have to say!

Last Sunday I went to great lengths to tell you that Jesus was not addressing worship of other religions when he said "I am the Way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." But this week we are squarely confronted with a story from Acts that deals with non-Christian religions. How convenient lest we forget that we live in a world of diversity and it is not likely that we can simply retreat to be with people who believe like we do.

So there are several things that we can draw from the story in Acts.

### Religion is a good thing

Paul acknowledges that the philosophical people of Athens are extremely religious in every way. He is not just trying to set them up. He knows religious people when he sees them - after all, Paul himself was very devoted to the Jewish faith and is now devoted to the worship of God in Christ.

Back in the 1970's my wife and I were influenced by a book entitled "How To Be A Christian Without Being Religious." This was a study of the Book of Romans. It used the

popular notion that we could be effective Christians without the trappings of religious practice. I have come full circle and no longer believe that - yes, I believe that someone can live a virtuous life without religious affections. But I feel that one needs to have ways of focusing on God to live a godly life - that is what religion is.

### Religion Must Have a Focus

The people of Athens were worshiping everything and everyone. Today we would think of them as superstitious. They worshiped anything and everything in their spiritual yearning. They feared that they would leave out something important, so they had an altar to the unknown god for extra insurance. Many people in our culture worship multiple pagan gods (money, possessions, power) and they go to church occasionally to cover their bases - extra insurance.

The chaplain at Duke University, William H. Willimon, summed up their difficulty and our modern difficulty in this way in his book Acts: "Pagans criticize the Christian faith as being 'simplistic,' 'pre-scientific,' 'superstitious' and then rush to the strange consolations of astrology, transcendental meditation, parapsychology, esoteric cults, or happy hearted humanism." Paul is telling us that a religious journey is by definition what life is all about, but every journey must also have a destination. Where will you be when you get where you're going? If life is only a search, only a journey, only an adventure with no "arrival," then God is, in fact, "unknown" (v. 23 a ).

I have all but quit using my digital camera since I got my new iPhone because the camera on the phone is so good and convenient. But I have taken a lot of bad pictures with the phone because it has an autofocus feature that sometimes focuses on the wrong thing. It sometimes picks a random point far away and causes the subject of my picture to come out blurry and unrecognizable. It has no focus.

Paul gives the people of Athens a focus when he tells them about the Jesus through which they can come to know the unknown god.

### Religion Finds Its Fulfillment in Jesus Christ

Jesus promised that when he went to stay with God, God would send an Advocate who would teach the disciples all things and remind them of the things Jesus had said to them. That was the same Advocate that Paul met in Christ of his blinding light on the road to Damascus. He offered the people of Athens the Resurrected One to lead them to the one God.

And we, too, can find fulfillment in our living by focusing on Jesus. We could spend our lives stumbling through life following one god and then another until the unnamed God gets our attention. Or we can seek God in the religion that has consistently found God in Christian practices of scripture study, prayer, discernment, holy living and worship.

As our confirmation class prepares to take vows of membership, and as our new high school graduates prepare to launch the next part of their lives, and as each of us prepares to go back into the world, I challenge you to keep your focus on Jesus - because in doing so, you keep your focus on living life that is pleasing to the God of the universe.