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CONCORD
SUNDAY
SCHOOL

LECTIONARY
LESSON 20

SUNDAY,
MAY 17, 2020

Acts 17:22-31

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 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.

24 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, 25 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. 26 From one an-

cestor 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, 27 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. 28 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.' 29 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. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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."

Background

Last week, we read a chilling story about the martyrdom of Stephen. Paul, then known as Saul, approved of this killing. Now, we see a very different version of Paul. This passage comes just one chapter after the jailing of Paul and Silas. As we journey through Acts, what are you noticing about the story of Paul? In your own devotional period, read Chapter 16 to get a sense of what Paul had been through up to this point. How might you feel if you were him? To say he was "active" in ministry would be an understatement.

Today's lesson will focus on understanding the world around us as Christians.

Read the scripture out loud together.

Discuss with someone in your home. If someone was meeting you for the first time, how would it be obvious that you are a Christian?

What's happening during this passage?

Paul, who lived a very different life as Saul in last week's passage, is publicly proclaiming in the Greek aristocratic court. This speech is aimed at the Athenians. You might even read a little snark in his words. He calls the Athenians "religious in every way" and begins to poke holes in their articles of worship. There are even some altars where the inscription is to "an unknown God," and Paul runs with that.

He uses this as a wedge to start telling his own testimony about a God who made the world, who does not live in human dwellings, who does not need human attention like the Athenians' gods. He boasts in God, because God made all the nations from "one ancestor" and has made so many paths for all people. Conversant in the Athenian culture, Paul quotes even the Athenian poetry for the aims of his own argument.

Even more, Paul says that God is not like "gold or silver," because such an image would be formed by the "art and imagination of mortals." The sermon ends with a warning-- Repent because a day of judgement is coming.

A warning: This vignette is not an excuse to practice religious intolerance towards people of other faiths. It matters that Paul is giving this speech at the **high court**, and not for example, in the town square.

How would you describe Paul here?

It was common for people to be known by two names at this time. Paul/Saul became the one exclusively known as Paul. And as Paul, he was a born-again convert. The man who once approved of the stoning of Stephen now proclaims Christ. With feeling and conviction, Paul rips the Athenian culture to shreds in their own very high court. Imagine someone like Don Lemon (who was not always as pro-Black as he is today) going to Capitol Hill to give an impassioned speech about Black liberation.

Often, people change their names to signify a cultural shift. Think Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Kwame Ture, Assata Shakur, and Yasiin Bey are all examples of people who felt that their new name would more ade-

quately reflect their identity. Or as Nina Simone sings, “I told Jesus it would be alright if He changed my name.”

How does Paul imagine God?

Paul talks about God with intimate language. For in him we “live and move and have our being.” Paul imagines that since we are “God’s offspring,” then we ought not imagine that God is like “gold, or silver, or stone.” If we are God’s offspring, then we must resemble God in some way. Are we as humans made out of gold, silver, or stone? No. Perhaps God, being a Parent, is more like us than the idols we construct.

Paul, in this way, is rejecting the tendency to turn God into a thing. It is one thing to have a symbol of our love as a reminder. It is common for people of the African diaspora (across the world!) to build altars to ancestors and to the Divine. These are not the unknown gods Paul may be talking about.

Sometimes, we make an idol out of profane things. We become obsessed with cash, luxury, brands, lavishness, power, fame, attention, glory. God is bigger than capital. God is bigger than gold, silver, stone, stocks, bonds. Even more than that, God is not found in gold, silver, stone, stocks or bonds. And having more material wealth does not make us closer to God.

What questions do you still have of this scripture?

How will you commit to journeying with this text this week?

Connection to Today’s World



image from aarp.org

As you may know, The Concord Baptist Church of Christ, through our Christfund, made a justice investment with *RIP Medical Debt* to eradicate over 4 million dollars of medical debt. People in Kings County, as well as some of our

neighbors in Newark, NJ, were cleared of the available medical debt on the records. Over 4,000 families were liberated from this debt. Pastor Simpson offered these words: “That millions of people are burdened by medical debt in the same country where corporate CEOs earned \$25 billion in profits during this pandemic is a blistering indictment on the whole country. We are observing physical distancing, but the church of Jesus Christ is never closed, and the mandate to do justice and love mercy – to declare Jubilee – is a way to walk humbly with our Creator during a pandemic.”

It should be illegal to profit off of vulnerable people in these times. Jeff Bezos and Amazon have made massive profits during the nationwide quarantine orders. He will pay nearly nothing in taxes, and any charitable gifts he makes will likely be considered write-offs. In this moment, people are price gouging on necessary items like bleach and masks. April saw the highest jump in grocery prices in years. In these times, Christians are called to take care of each other and the most vulnerable. We will show our faith in God not by rushing back to church, or by buying the biggest cross jewelry, or even by reciting the most scriptures. We show our faith by living as Christ taught us. We don't put trust in horses, land, chariots or stock markets. We put trust in the one who is bigger than all human-made idols.

Journal: If God is not in silver and gold, where do you experience God? Where do you hear the voice of the Lord the loudest? What makes you feel close to God?

Closing: Watch (and sing along) to “Silver and Gold” by Kirk Franklin

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8_ZyyM-Cqc

“Silver and gold, silver and gold.
I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold
No fame or fortune, nor riches untold
I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold”

Prayer:

Dear God,

You know who we are and what we need. Some of us come to you needing material blessings. Some of us need to find a way to pay the rent or the mortgage this month. Some of us are still struggling to find ways to put food on the table.

We know that you are not found in silver or gold. You are our God, and we are your offspring. You know what it is like to be in need. You are the God who sends a ram in the bush, a friend in the wilderness, and living water in the desert.

As we look around at all that is happening, keep us focused on you and your love. Help us to multiply this love all for your glory.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen