Acts 17:16-34 Athens: Call to Repent
CCC – July 9, 2017

We're in a series we've called the Church in Action – where we're following the journey of the gospel through various cities in Acts – seeing how message of Jesus impacted the people then, how the church was formed, and what we can learn about the church today through their witness.

We've seen a church that listens and respond to God's voice – one's that's RIPE. A church that's faithful; vibrant; diverse; Spirit-led. Today, Paul ends up in Athens – alone, which is different from all the other cities - 250 miles from his companions in Berea. He doesn't stay long and we're not sure if he ever returns.

So what does the Lord do through Paul in Athens?
Scripture Reading (Acts 17:16-34) and Prayer

Athens had existed as a foremost Greek city-state for 500 years by the time Paul comes to town. Because of its prominence and legacy and honor in the ancient world that it was given unprecedented freedom from Rome as a free and allied city within Empire, rather than a city in submission.

The city was dripping with reminders of its eminent past [slide]. How do you witness to the good news of Jesus in Athens? This was the cradle of democracy; the spot for philosophy's hall-of-fame - Socrates, Plato… Aristotle, Epicurus made their home in Athens. There was enthralling, stunning architectural beauty. Beyond this, Athens was also known for its religious fervor. The streets of Athens were lined with gods; they were carved into buildings. In waiting for his team to arrive, v23 says, *I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of* worship. Paul would no doubt have walked through the Acropolis, this high, flat-topped rock with imposing temples like the Parthenon, which housed the great goddess Athena. He would have walked through the Agora, or the marketplace, where philosophers and teachers competed with peddlers and tradesmen to capture your attention.

For someone with his educational pedigree, Athens might have been a type of destination city. But Paul's not here as a tourist; he's escaping persecution from Macedonia; he's seeking to obey the Lord's direction. He was waiting for his team to re-assemble, but he couldn't just "wait".

Somehow, I just can't picture Paul signing up for the bus tour, wearing a fanny pack and doing selfies everywhere… Not quite his style. In fact, rather than being over-awed by it all, or thinking only from a worldly perspective, the Scripture says Paul was *greatly distressed (16).* Why*?* His heart was distressed to see the city dripping with idols, smothered in idols, under the weight of them. He may have had any number of thought and emotions, but this is the response recorded as a witness and example for us. Paul was provoked in his soul.

Is our soul soft enough to be provoked when the glory of Christ is robbed by something or someone seeking the honor that's due to HIM? I heard a friend tell of her mourning in a visit to Las Vegas, the weight of the sin and folly, the chasing after the world. Is our heart soft enough to be stirred up by sin?

What does Paul do with the distress he feels over the idols? God moves him to act. We'll unpack all this in a bit, but listen first to the heart of his message, found in v30: *in the past God overlooked such ignorance (that is, idolatry), but now he commands all people everywhere to repent*. At the heart of the ministry in this city we see that the spiritual distress Paul felt for Athens led him to call the people to repent.

Now in 50AD he calls all people to repent and NOW in 2016, God calls all people to repent. What started with Christ continues today. To turn from false sources of life and power and hope; to turn TO Him. This isn't just the voice of one apostle, either… this is the role of the church in action – both TO repent ourselves and to call others into this same mercy.

A Church in action calls people to repent. In Joel 2, the prophet writes, *blow the trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm on God's holy hill… for the Day of the Lord is coming.* Turn, turn, turn – God is coming. The announcement is associated with the TRUMPET blast. I feel like Paul's message in Athens shows us that the NT gospel call to repentance is a full orchestra, each playing its part, each sounding it's different note, together making a music that reaches the whole of culture. Together, we call out, TURN! What instrument are you playing?

A Church in action calls people to repent. This is our working conviction. But before we look too much further at HOW this happens, we need to pause and make sure we understand some other basics –the what and why of repentance.

So let's start there….

I. What is repentance?

Repentance is more than a command (though not less). It's more than a human action, though we DO respond. Repentance is the mercy of God and the opportunity of God. The opportunity to bring healing where there was brokenness. The soul is fractured but repentance sets the break. It is God's mercy for us to <u>see and enter</u> what he has for his children. Repentance is a grace that turns us to God and away from sin, transforming our relationship with him. It's the renewal of our relationship with God that changes our entire person – thoughts, words, actions.

When you hear a call to repent… do you only hear man's judgment? Criticism? The call to be better, somehow? Do you only hear angry voices from megaphones or tones that sound like the ones that filled your childhood? This isn't God's repentance.

Instead, Hear: we were walking in a mess of our own design, a war-torn landscape, marked by destruction – burned out cars, craters, knocked down buildings – but in repentance,

there's the invitation, the mercy of God, to walk in His field, bursting with life, with safety, with a cool breeze and no fear – most of all, with the closeness and nearness of God.

In repentance, we discover that what we thought was bringing us life was actually leading us to ruin. In repentance, we admit that we can't and won't figure it out on our own. In repentance, we discover the joy and life and the freedom of walking in right relationship with God.

Is it time for you to repent? Is it time for you to repent? Whether specific sin or the whole direction of your life? It's the mercy and opportunity of God. There's often an initial life-altering repentance in our faith journey, yes. But hear this too - repentance isn't just a one-time line we cross, but the discipline of a disciple when we discover our hearts going the wrong way.

Often our repentance has to do with false gods, false sources of life. This is Paul's focus in Athens, <u>Idolatry</u>. It's the very stronghold that has Athens in its grip, the sin pattern that so greatly distressed Paul. Imagine the boldness to stand in view of the temples and gods and goddesses of a city with the reputation like Athens and say – *the God who made the world does not live in temples built by human hands (24).*

What is Idolatry? Anything that acts as a god-substitute. Paul's message breaks down and undercuts the logic of idolatry, subtly highlighting its dangers.

We make idols when we try to fit God into limits that WE choose defining him according to our desires. But *God made the world and everything in it* (v24); But he will not submit to OUR hands. HE is the potter; we are the clay. We don't make God into our image or craft Him the way we want. God's not a progressive; God's not a conservative. He IS. I am who I am.

We also can't tame him to do what we want. *HE is Lord of heaven and earth… he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything* (v25). *HE gives everyone life and breath and everything else.* And yet we act like we can get God to do what we want by being really good, or praying really hard, or making him bargains. If you do this, god, heal my sister, I'll… I'll volunteer every week at the Haven. I'll give up gambling. I'll… This is religious idolatry.

The idols we create for ourselves may not be silver and gold, but they're all attempts to control the divine and, ultimately, to make ourselves gods. To put ourselves in position to judge God's motives… to put Him on trial.

IN the coming of Christ, God turns into a new lane related to his dealings with mankind – *in the past God overlooked such ignorance*, *BUT NOW* he *commands all people to repent.*

What are <u>our</u> idols? What are the things, ideas, people that YOU substitute for god – for comfort, for power, for devotion?

I'm learning to repent when I try to be more than who God made me; feel compelled to be all things to all people – proud, self-reliant. God's gracious to call me to turn from this.

What are the idols of Charlottesville? What might Paul say on the steps of the Rotunda – our Areopagus? Or on the downtown Mall – our Agora? There's a pervasive humanism here, is there not? This underlying belief that we're the solution to our problems? Action is good; thinking we're the solution, apart from God, is not. A temptation for us as we are a church in action will be to do it on our own, in our strength. Our idols are *made by human design and skill*, as v29 says… We have to own up that our design and skill won't be enough.

Success is another, is it not? The bar is HERE (way up!) and you have to work really hard to get there, stay there, BE that good. If you can't measure up, well, then… If you're not tops at something in Charlottesville… something's wrong. And it's not just for the money or power, I don't think – it's the status, the pride. Students – do you ever feel that way? Do we parents help to place that pressure on them? Do you feel the temptation to worship success?

Humanism, success, pluralism, racism, intellectualism, materialism, hedonism… *God calls all people everywhere to repent*.

AS we turn from our idols – as we leave them behind and put our trust in Jesus, appointed by God, raised from the dead, Lord of Lords… then we begin to taste the mercy and walk in new life.

This is WHAT it is. But we not only experience repentance, but share it as well. We sound the call; we play our tune. ***A Church in action calls people to repent.*** *So…*

II. Why? Why be a people who call others to repent?

V31 says, *God will judge the world with justice* (v31). DO we believe this? Starting with ourselves and extending to all people?

And … If we do believe this… Is it not an act of great love to offer this gift?

Why don't we call others to repent? *Why don't we play our song?* Do we feel like we're peddling something, or forcing something, or being judgmental? Are we afraid others might not like our music?

Calling people to repentance does not mean we're forcing ourselves or our ideas onto people. It doesn't mean being rude or brash or self-righteous. We're not taking high ground. We tell our own stories of repentance. We show our own need. We don't have to use the language of repentance. The heart is an invitation to turn; an invitation to try something new… to taste and see that the Lord is good.

In LOVE, Paul does not keep the gospel to himself. [slide] The God of LOVE calls for repentance. This is our motivation – compassion, concern.

Finally, and here's the key question in terms of application…

III. How? How do we call people to repent?

This is what has gotten this passage all its attention. As Paul beautifully models for us, we call people to repent through a message they can understand. There's someone who needs to hear this message through your instrument. They tune out the trumpet, but are drawn in by the violin, the keys.

Church in action calls people to repent IN language and forms that make sense; we speak into the cultural forms in cultural language. As might be taught in public speaking class or in the business world - "Know your audience". The Super Bowl is known for Bud light, Doritos, and Pepsi commercials. You don't see the same things if you watch Wimbledon.

We see this happening with Paul in Athens. He visits the synagogue, just like everywhere else. We can assume he follows his pattern here of reasoning with people from the Scriptures to show how Jesus is the Messiah.

The second is the marketplace, this open-air Roman melting pot of sights and sounds and smells and people. This is in v17-18. IN the marketplace, Paul takes advantage of the culture of free speech and the discussion of ideas to present HIS philosophy… It seems the Stoics and Epicureans held court in the marketplace. And even though they were competing ideas about life and happiness and purpose, Paul's "third way" contrasted them both. Initially this led to some mocking, some belittling. They call him a babbler… one scholar says this was the equivalent of bird-brain or "uneducated"…

AND YET, through this witness in the marketplace, God opens the door for him to speak at the Areopagus, one of the premier councils of wisdom and learning of the ancient world.

The speech Paul gives in the Areopagus is among one of the most studied parts of the whole books of acts. It's a noted model of how to contextualize the gospel, putting the good news in terms that people can understand. Speaking their language.

Two examples for how Paul does this. First, He finds a point of commonality as a starting point, an entry into the conversation as it were. This is in v23 – *this altar to an unknown god*. He doesn't begin with the Hebrews Scriptures, but in their language, from what was on their view-screen. And he builds from there.

And secondly, along the way, he seeks to highlight common or shared truths. He's not afraid to use quotes from the poets or philosophers of the day (28) to build trust, the build understanding, to build connection. Note, in all this, Paul never shies away from the offense of the gospel – repentance and resurrection.

Most of us won't be doing public speaking – our witness will be one-to-one… at the cubicle, on the playground swings, over coffee. Do we seek to speak the gospel in language others

can understand? DO we find points of commonality? Can we tell our own stories in concise, honest, God-honoring ways?

Conclusion

A Church in action calls people to repent. An invitation of grace to LEAVE our idols and come to the true God. Why do we sound this call? Love!!! In love, we invite all people to LIFE. In love, we don't hide the truth – we're provoked in soul and heart.

The most basic/key step in all this might be to just doing it. Are we calling others to repent? Are we sounding the instruments God has given us? Church, are we calling people, beginning with ourselves, to repent?