

Proclaiming the Unknown that You Worship – The Rev. Giovan Venable King+
Easter 6A – May 25, 2014 - Acts 17.15-34 – St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Kailua

Tom and I took a really memorable trip to Greece several years ago, to the 2005 International Congregational Fellowship meetings. So, I guess when I say “several years ago,” I mean “nine years ago.” Amazing that it has been that long ago. I was right in the midst of transitioning from the Congregational ministry into the Episcopal priesthood.

That conference lasted one week. I’m pretty sure I’ve mentioned it before. It was on the island of Corfu, known in the 19th and early 20th centuries as the playground of the royalty of Europe. A funny place to have a church conference? Not really, when you realize that a big reason we went there was that it was less than a mile across a waterway from Albania, which, until a few years before, had been the most closed country in the world. A virtual North Korea. And when it opened up, Christians who had been praying for years, on the coast of Corfu, facing Albania, were right there, ready to go and make disciples. And, so, now, there are many Christian churches on that coast of Albania, and both the Congregational Church AND the Anglican Church on Corfu played a large role in that.

Anyway, following the conference, Tom and I traveled to Thessaloniki and Philippi, in northeastern Greece, where Paul first preached the gospel to Europeans.

Unlike Tom and me, Paul probably never made it to Olympia, in the south, three hours west of Corinth. Its claim to fame, of course, was as the site of the ancient Olympic Games, which had been going on for about eight hundred years by the time Paul came along, and continued for another three hundred years after his death. Having worked for the LA Olympic Organizing Committee in 1984, and having just given a keynote speech on “Running the Race,” the theme of our International meetings, I believe I would have felt a bit cheated had we skipped Olympia. But, I’ll admit, we didn’t spend much time there, since we considered ourselves more on a “Biblical tour of Greece.”

After Olympia, it was back to Athens. Our first stop: the Acropolis.

Working with the Greek language all week, I was reminded that “Acro – polis” means “above the city” and of course that is exactly where it is. It is also the site of the Parthenon, built for the goddess Athena, for whom the city is named. But, I didn’t realize until we visited this time that the Parthenon also did time as a Christian church, in the 5th century or so. And, of course, there are several churches, all through the city.

Paul’s preaching in Athens, generally remembered as not having been so successful, obviously eventually took hold. Perseverance was a sub-theme of our Conference, and Paul was a master of perseverance. Paul had been used to seeing monuments and shrines to the Greek and Roman gods, as an inhabitant of the Greco-Roman world. But, he had never seen as many as he saw when he entered Athens. This troubled him greatly. And, he wasn’t completely sure what to say to the people of this city, how to couch the Gospel message so that the Athenians would ‘get it.’ And, then he was given a “gift from the Gods,” as the Greeks might so -- or simply “a gift from the one true God” – as Paul, and we, might say.

In his usually politic way, he seems to commend them on how religious they are (although perhaps he is thinking of it in the negative sense – sort of in the same way people today say, “Well, I’m spiritual, but not religious). But, Paul also takes the opportunity to remark on something that had made a big impression on him.

At one of the Athens harbors, apparently, there were altars to the Goddess Artemis (goddess of hunting), and one to Demeter (Goddess of agriculture), but also at least one altar to “unknown Gods.” The Greeks were open to the possibility of other Gods besides their own, and wanted to make sure that they didn’t slight any God. So, erecting altars to “unknown gods” was a way of covering all of their bases, so to speak.

Note, that Paul’s reference is an altar to “AN unknown God.” And then he says these wonderful words, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” He tells them that the one God is God of all, from creation on; the one God needs nothing from us, but rather provides everything for us; we are children of this one God; this one God is near every one of us.

Now, that’s the kind of evangelizing I like. Paul doesn’t chastise them, telling them that they don’t really know God, that they aren’t really Christians, that they are going to hell, or Hades, if they don’t sign on to Paul’s God, exactly as Paul describes him. Paul tells them that they have been worshiping this creator God, this loving God, all along – they just haven’t realized it. It makes me feel good to know that I take an approach that St. Paul took so long ago. I spend much more time trying to convince skeptics that they really do believe in our God than I spend trying to convince Christians who don’t believe exactly as I do that they are not true Christians. And, that is the difference between evangelizing – proclaiming the good news – and proselytizing – trying to convert people to your way of believing. ... At least in my opinion.

The Athenians did consider the resurrection of the body – the physical resurrection – a stumbling block to belief in Paul’s systematic theology, and Paul addresses that in some of his letters. But, they really were open to hear what Paul had to say. And, it is noteworthy that Dionysius the Aeropagite, one of the most important men in the city, apparently, became a believer that day. It is also noteworthy that a woman named Damaris, and others with her and Dionysius, also became believers.

Paul was no failure in Athens. And, the Parthenon wasn’t just a monument to the Greek goddess Athena – it eventually became a Christian Church, dedicated first to Saint Sophia – that is, to Holy Wisdom. Later it was dedicated to someone besides Athena who also became known as “parthenos” – “virgin” – Mary, the mother of Jesus.

You just never know what’s going to happen when you evangelize – you share the good news of our God in Jesus Christ. And, sometimes, when you, or others, believe you have been a failure, that’s when you’ve been the most successful. Or, as I’m sure Paul would be quick to say, “That’s when GOD has been the most successful.” Amen.