



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “MISSION IN THE MARKETPLACE”

Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 10:1-17; Acts 17:16-34

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 15, 2020 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Acts 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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, 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. From one ancestor 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, 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. 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.”

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. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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.’

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week, Dr. Massie made the assertion with regard to tradition and heritage that we all have one and granted it may be back in the recesses of our minds and our memories, but it is there, nevertheless. Well, I think the same could be said of spirituality because there's not a person here today or anywhere for that matter who is not at some level spiritual, if for no other reason than we all have a spirit. To be certain, that at a very basic level having been created in the image of God, we each have the capacity to reflect something of God's love, and that is profoundly spiritual.

One could argue that being spiritual is altogether natural, and it could be a blessed thing to be certain. But spirituality when lived apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ, well in that case, it can become for us like an idol. We are continually invited to kneel at the world's altars of mysticism and pluralism, and all of life's "isms," causes and theories, a veritable cornucopia of spiritual truth. And you can have your truth and I can have mine, but shunned is the idea that there exists any absolute truth.

Strikes me that a kind of similar kind of altar is being talked about here in our New Testament lesson from the book of Acts. The Apostle Paul enters a magnificent city of Athens and he quickly realizes that it is a spiritual marketplace. There's one false god after another, and to cover their bases, just in case, there's even an altar to an unknown god. Now clearly those people are spiritual; they are taking their spirituality to an unhealthy place, to an unholy place. See, instead of directing their attention in their adoration and their worship, and their love and their service to the very living God, they were directing their spiritual attention to altars and to idols.

We don't have to read Paul's writings very long to learn that Paul despises idols. He sees in them one of the greatest impediments to a life lived in faith, and this is nothing new. It is not unique to Paul, even God recognizes our propensity to yield to other things so much so that he declares in his commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me." "Don't make unto me any graven image." It seems clear enough one would think that we'd get it right now, but even some 800 years after Moses, and when Jeremiah is God's Prophet, we're still not putting God first.

Now as we take a moment and look at Jeremiah's critique of idols, I want us to also consider the manner in which God's people are engaged. In other words, I want us to take to heart the words and the imagery that Jeremiah uses, and that he chooses to convey to the people. For example, Jeremiah's audience would have known the particular story that comes to us from 1 Samuel chapter 5. In that story, we're talking about a time when the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, and they placed it overnight in a room with their false god Dagon, but in the morning that statue of Dagon had fallen over. Well they prop it up and fasten it, and the next morning, Dagon has fallen over again, but this time his head is broken off, and his hands have broken off. And the reason I bring that story up is because Jeremiah's audience, when they hear Jeremiah talk about how you have to use a hammer and a nail to keep idols in their place, they

would have surely remembered how it was that another people in another time and place, that they had to do much the same thing.

Jeremiah's audience would have also known the story of Jonah, and how it was that God had called him to go to the city of Nineveh to cry out against her, and to declare that her wickedness had not escaped God's attention. And so what does Jonah do, but he goes down to the boat dock and he gets on a boat not bound for Nineveh but bound for Tarshish, basically the completely opposite direction of Nineveh. And I have no doubt that the story of Jonah would have also resonated and resounded loud and clear in the minds of Jeremiah's audience, especially when he talks about how some of these idols were made from silver, and that silver comes from where, from Tarshish.

Oh, how far away from God are the idols of our lives, and I mention these things because it is clear that Jeremiah is well aware of the people's context. In other words, Jeremiah knows their background; he knows their history, and their heritage, and he's mindful of all of that as he crafts the message that they most need to hear. It's not unlike what Paul does when he visits the city of Athens, and with knowledge of who those people are well in tow, Paul begins to engage their misguided spirituality.

Treating this encounter in this marketplace of ideas as a mission, a means of helping people to understand what true spirituality is all about, and how Paul does this is fascinating. He walks up to them and he basically says, "You know I've been walking around your city. I've been paying attention to your objects of worship, and I ran across this shrine with the inscription to an "unknown god." Well, let me tell you what you don't know about him. I know this "unknown god," and let me tell you about him. Paul then goes on to talk about God as the one who has existed from before the foundation of the world, one who in Jeremiah, it tells us "he called forth the order in the heavens with his mere understanding," and we need to understand that what Paul is doing here is he's talking in a way that helps these people to understand him. It's not unlike how Jesus spoke using words and images that would relate to his audience when calling the disciples, for example, those are fishermen. What does Jesus tell them? He says, "I'll help you to become, will help you to fish for people," right?

So it happens that here in Athens, the people who are listening to Paul, these the Bible tells us are their Epicurean stoics, these are Greek philosophers, and so Paul speaks to them in ways that are kind of ethereal and lofty, that makes sense to them; he's speaking their language. And when Paul says that this is the God in whom we live and move and have our being, he's tapping into their communal tradition. He's referencing one of their philosophers, Epimenides, who's saying much the same thing at this time. And when he says, "We too are his offspring," Paul is referencing one of their poets.

So what's happening here is that Paul is using who the people are, their history and their heritage, as a means of building a bridge, because where that bridge goes is absolutely critical. Paul then introduces within the framework of their story, a new story, the story of Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul shares with them that the world will be judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed, and that God has given proof of this by raising that man from the dead.

Notice what Paul did; he took their story and he placed it squarely within the context of God's story, that blessed story of Jesus Christ our Lord, who by its very nature has the capacity to radically reinterpret all of the other stories of our life, and Paul did it in a respectful and a reverent way. He didn't stand up on his soapbox and lecture ex cathedra; he met the Athenians on their own turf. He found out what mattered to them; he learned their story; he spoke their language. Goodness knows this is so much easier said than done.

When I was in high school, someone I knew was into crystals, and I thought it was ridiculous, and I let him know as much. You know, but maybe had I known then what I know now, maybe I would have engaged him a little bit differently, more kindly perhaps, a little more hospitable perhaps. If I had it to do over again, I might say something like this, "You know, I don't believe in crystals like you do, but I do know that in the Book of Revelation, that it talks about the City of God coming down, that it's going to look as precious as jewels and as clear as crystal." If I said something like that, maybe I could have earned another opportunity to speak; maybe if I had responded differently than I did, I could have been a better instrument of God's mercy and God's grace, but as it stood, the conversation ended there.

Paul gives us a model for how we, too, can take something which perhaps on its face may be offensive, but to take that altar to an unknown god, whatever it may be, and engage that story, if not transform that story for the sake of Jesus Christ. What a challenge that is for the church today to actively and effectively engage the world so that the world may come to know God's love, to get out into that Athens of ours, our own unique spiritual marketplace, and to hear those stories that sometimes make our stomachs churn, but to not give up.

I recall another occasion, it was perhaps a better day for me as a pastor, a student walked up and asked me if Jesus was married. I think he must have been reading or watching *The Davinci Code* or something like that, and I remember telling him first of all that no Jesus wasn't married but we also use that question as a wonderful entry point into a conversation about that young person's life. You see, that person was about to start dating, if they weren't dating already, and one day perhaps he would fall in love and get married, and so we pondered together, what if Jesus had been married. What kind of husband would he have been? It gave us a chance to ask the question: How would Jesus have treated his wife? It was a good conversation for that young man to think about the dignity and the reference with which he would treat his future spouse. It was a wonderful challenge we have.

What a wonderful opportunity in our time to do as our Savior has done, to actually dwell among others and to speak the truth in love, and in such a way that others can hear it. But let us not miss the point, salvation is none other than the work of God, and yet God has determined to work in and through us to be human agents for the world, and yes, there's the capacity on the part of the here to claim God's love for themselves, but there's also a capacity on our part to effectively share the message of salvation and to do so in such a way that not only do we respect people for who they are, but we also help them to know they cannot remain that way, because at the end of the day, there is absolutely nothing for them or for us at the foot of the world's altars. Yielding to those idols amounts to a spiritual emptiness; they're dead, and they're lifeless. It is not in them to do good, and it's not in them to do harm. They're just there, and if I know

anything about God's will for your life and our life together, God did not create us just to be here. God created us for life and life abundant, and ours is a spiritual life, which by God's grace endures. That is something we must help the world to understand because if anyone is ever to truly understand their story, they're going to have to understand it in light of God's story, in light of God's story of salvation, that drama of redeeming love of which we are also apart. That is the key to life, and that, dear friends, is the Gospel.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.