

When in Athens

I was absolutely astonished a few weeks ago, when I was doing sermon planning, to discover that I've never preached from the passage I just read. Not only is this a pretty famous story from Acts, memorialized in the names of a number of churches, colleges and other ways, but it is absolutely relevant to our mission in the greater Seattle area for a number of reasons. There are a number of parallels between Seattle and the Greco-Roman city of Athens to begin with and Paul's approach to the Athenians gives us a blueprint for how it is we are to approach the "[Spiritual but not religious](#)" inhabitants of our Emerald City region. This story has a great deal to tell us about our own situation and I'm a little embarrassed that I've let it go until over 9 years into my pastorate before speaking on it.

Seattle is not a perfect parallel for Athens but there are a number of strong similarities. Although by Paul's time Athens was a provincial city in the Roman Empire rather than being the capital of its own empire, as it had been in older times, it was still an important and highly thought of city. Seattle has never been the seat of an empire, though we are represented by the [World Champion Seattle Seahawks](#), which I suppose is something, as long as you don't worry too much about the fact that the rest of the world plays a completely different sport which they call football and we call soccer. The Athenians were probably nearly as sports-mad as we are; ardent runners, swimmers, wrestlers, and discus-throwers rather than fans of baseball, basketball, and the like, although I suspect that the recent passion for "CrossFit" would have appealed to them. The Athenians had an ancient myth of laws being handed down from [Olympus](#). We, too, have a myth of effective government in which laws come down from [Olympia](#) and frankly, I'm not sure which mythos is more fanciful.

More to the point, though, and more seriously, the Athenians were famed for being patrons of culture, hosts of education, and for being a highly literate, intellectually curious bunch. The three great playwrights of early drama, [Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides](#), all were based in Athens. No Seattle-based playwright has made such a splash – the late [August Wilson](#), though he lived here for a time, is mostly connected with his original home of Pittsburgh, and [Robert Schenkkan](#), though he's won a Pulitzer Prize, is largely unknown by the general public. Seattle does, however, boast a thriving theatre scene that is the envy of many other cities and we can add to that significant institutions in the other arts, such as [Seattle Opera, Seattle Symphony, Seattle Art Museum](#) and a [host of others](#). [Dale Chihuly's work](#) may be fragile but some of it will last as long as the words of [Aeschylus](#), I think.

Perhaps the most famous educational institution in history is the [Academy, founded in Athens](#) by Plato after his studies in that city with Socrates. One of Plato's students was Aristotle, so again we have a trio of famous Athenians at the root of a significant branch of European and American culture. Seattle has proven itself to be a hotbed of learning as well with educational institutions like [UW, Cornish, SPU, Seattle U, Fuller Northwest](#), and many others. In our expanded world of knowledge, we should also consider on Seattle's behalf such scientific research and commerce hubs as "[the Hutch](#)," [Seattle Children's Hospital](#), Microsoft, the bio-tech community... the list goes on and on. And Seattleites are generally more educated than U.S. average: 32% of us have "Some college or an associate's degree," as opposed to 29% nationally; 24% of us have a bachelor's degree, as opposed to 18% nationally; and, while only 10% of Americans have a master's degree or higher, 13% of Seattle metro residents have an advanced degree.

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I mentioned the Athenians high standards of literacy and intellectual curiosity and Seattle certainly has those same attributes. For the past seven years, Seattle has ranked either number one or number two [in a study that combines several factors to determine the number of people per metro area who actually choose to read in their spare time](#). The study looks at six categories: Booksellers, Internet, libraries, newspaper and publication circulation and educational attainment to see how people actually use their literacy. I know this next bit will please Mary Lu: the most important factor, according to Mark McGlaughlin at Central Connecticut State University, is libraries. McGlaughlin says, “[Libraries] indicate how strongly a city is committed, because tax dollars are associated with them.”

The thirst for knowledge and its accompanying search for meaning leads me to one final comparison between Seattle and Athens that is not, at first glance, apparent. The Athenians, curious about the new teaching that Paul has, invite him to come and speak on the Areopagus. I’ll come back to that peculiar word in a few minutes but first I want to look at how Paul begins his speech to them. “Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.”” Now, that doesn’t sound like Seattle at all, does it? Our region is famous, after all, for being “the None zone,” the part of the United States where more and more respondents to the census and other surveys give their religious affiliation as “None.” In a recent poll, less than 36% of the residents of the Seattle metro area claimed to be “religious,” compared to nearly 50% of Americans in general. But that disavowal of organized religion doesn’t mean a disinterest in spiritual life. Seattle is equally well-known for being the center of the “Spiritual but not Religious” movement. These folks have turned their backs on the trappings of religion as they see them but continue to be concerned about their spiritual well-being. And they haven’t completely discarded the idea of God. A recent survey of those who identify as “Spiritual but not Religious” shows that 44% of them see God as a higher power or cosmic force, while 50% of them refer to God as “fatherly.” They are, to borrow a church term that’s gotten a lot of use in recent decades, “Seekers.”

But what about those Athenians whom Paul called “extremely religious?” I think if they were around today, we would call them “Seekers,” too. What we tend to think of as Greek religion, the belief in Zeus and Hera and Apollo and Athena and the rest, had waned centuries before the time of Jesus. Socrates, the great Father of Greek Philosophy, had been put to death for a variety of charges which included “not believing in the gods of the state.” Among the temples and shrines which Paul would have seen in his time in Athens would have been temples to the Egyptian gods, Isis and Serapis. The Athenians gathered on the Areopagus to hear Paul that day were not “extremely religious” in the conventional sense; they were desperately searching among the religions and philosophies of the world for answers to questions they had about life. And so, in an effort to make sure that they gave everything and everybody a fair shot, they had built the altar “to an unknown God.”

Now, with that backdrop, let’s look at what Paul says to the intellectual flower of Athens. We know from the beginning of the passage that Paul is “deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols,” so, knowing how combative Paul can be, we might expect him to open up like a good Southern evangelist: “Y’all are a bunch of stupid heathens! How dumb to you have to be to worship idols?” But he doesn’t do that at all. Instead, he compliments them on their search for meaning and then offers to add to it. And the impetus for their searching, he tells them,

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comes from the very Creator they are searching for. He does not demean their quest but shows them how it is connected to the message he has for them. It is the beginning of a way to tell them that they are God's beloved children.

Paul is also adept at putting things to them in ways he knows they will understand. When in Athens, he does as the Athenians do. He quotes Epimenides of Crete, one of the most famous poets of Athenian history, who had said of the Greek god Zeus some 600 years earlier, "In you we live and move and have our being." Paul shows his hosts that he understands their culture and respects it to the point of being able to use a quotation from this esteemed writer in his argument to them. He is not simply a "babbler," as some of them have thought; he is an educated man. He is not simply proclaiming a "foreign deity;" he is able to show them how the Good News he brings is already intertwined with their culture and their quest for meaning. Paul begins the process of winning them over by showing that he values who they are and what they think.

For us, in "Spiritual but not Religious," highly educated, highly cultured Seattle, this approach is key if we want to continue in the work of spreading the Good News about Jesus. In Seattle, we must do as Seattle does. If we want Good Shepherd Baptist Church to continue into the future, to attract more people and younger people, as you all have said multiple times in many ways in the last decade, we need to pay attention to Paul's approach on the Areopagus. We must learn the language of the generations not represented or under-represented in our congregation, their quest, their poetry, and we must learn to feed it back to them in a way that carries them toward the Loving Creator whom we hold so dear and toward the love and freedom they will find in our Good Shepherd.

This is actually the basic lesson of the Areopagus. I promised I'd unpack that word for you, so here goes. It was a high place in the city of Athens, a small bald knob, if you will, a rocky hill. It was dedicated to Ares, their god of war, not for combat but for debate, for the free and rigorous exchange of ideas. Areopagus translates to "the hill of Ares." Of course, we may know it by a slightly different translation because Ares was known as Mars to the Romans, so it is also "Mars' Hill." There is an institute of higher learning in North Carolina called Mars Hill University and there used to be one here in Seattle called Mars Hill Graduate School. There must be hundreds of churches around the country that incorporate the words Mars Hill but of course the most famous is also here in Seattle. That's the reason that Mars Hill Graduate School changed their name to the [Seattle School of Theology and Psychology](#). They had intended to evoke that free and rigorous exchange of ideas and instead found themselves inadvertently connected to a fairly doctrinaire group of evangelicals. But for all the theological differences we might have with Mars Hill Church, and I confess I have several, we really ought to learn something important from them. They have learned, like Paul, to speak the language of the culture around them. In Seattle, they do as Seattle does. They win adherents not by the winsomeness of their theology – they admit their brand of Calvinism is tough – but by speaking to people in a way they understand, by dressing like they do and adapting their style of music and relating to their neighbors. They speak to the quest of the younger generations in Seattle and, if we are to survive as a church, so must we.

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Hear me carefully: I'm not advocating that we all start wearing skinny jeans and get multiple piercings and tattoos. Some of us, especially me, would look ridiculous and such actions would rightly be seen as desperate and inauthentic. What we do need to do is to acquaint ourselves with the culture of those we seek to attract and to understand it well enough to value it. If our kids and grandkids or even great-grandkids are watching "The Walking Dead" and "Game of Thrones" every week, looking forward to each episode, tivo'ing them so they don't miss them, we'd better understand why. What's the appeal? How do those shows speak to their lives, their fears? What are the qualities they appreciate? Are they still listening to grunge music?

Doubtful, but if they are, why? Hip hop? [Death Cab for Cutie](#)? [Mumford and Sons](#)? [The Civil Wars](#)? I'm not asking you to profess a fanboy or fangirl attitude toward everything the 15-40 year olds in your families like but if you can't hold an intelligent conversation with them about it, what are you going to talk about? I'm very much pointing the finger at myself here, too, by the way. Although I do really like those last three bands.

The thing is, we can't simply go through life dismissing the parts of our culture that belong to younger people or immigrants or those with more or less education than we have or those who make more or less money than we do. We are called, my sisters and my brothers, as the Body of Christ, to reach out and love those people and we can't do that unless we can talk with them in ways that lower the barriers between us. We can't deride them for their interests and beliefs and then expect them to take our seriously. Even Paul knew that and we all know how pugnacious some of his writings are. Instead, we must learn what is important to our neighbors so that we can enter into dialog with them about it. It's part of what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel according to John when he reminded his disciples that they were called to be in the world without being of the world. We must understand what's going on around us without letting the fads displace the eternal truths of God in Christ. As my late professor, Dr. Harold Songer used to say, "If you see a bunch of people standing in a line, go join them. You might find out about something worth knowing."

The end of our passage mentions a man who continued to listen to Paul and became a believer in the Good News of Jesus, a man called Dionysius the Areopagite. Church tradition says that this Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens. About 500 years later, a series of mystical Christian writings became attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, although nowadays most scholars agree that they could not have been written by the same man, so the author is referred to as pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, which is quite a mouthful. It's fitting though, as we consider the positives and negatives of relating to our contemporary culture, to hear one little bit of his writing. "Even those who seem to be 'devils,'" he wrote, "derive their existence from the Good, and are naturally good, and desire the Beautiful and Good in desiring existence, life, and consciousness..." It's a good reminder to us that even those who seem culturally so different from us, perhaps even repugnant, are human beings just as we are, filled with impulses both good and bad, seeking for the way to live their life that will bring them and those they care for happiness and fulfillment. God's creation is complex and varied, not just in the wildly different appearances of plants and animals but in the way that people think and dream and express themselves. When we give thanks to our God and King for all of the creatures God has created, we mean our very different sisters and brothers as well. And if we are truly thankful for them, hadn't we better learn to love them and show them our love? If we truly find our city beautiful, if we seek to be those who love and serve our city and bring it hope and glory and joy in God's

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presence, we must love all those who make up that city. God has called to us; let us not fail that call by failing our city.

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