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“Very Religious in Every Way” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (5/14/2023, Sixth Sunday after Easter)

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Let us pray.

Almighty God, to me the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.

It's probably not technically a violation of the canons of the Episcopal Church, but I'm gonna not preach on the gospel today. I just wanted to let you all know, I know, right, Dean, yeah, it's a big deal. I'm going to preach and talk about the passage from the book of Acts. And so as I do, so, I want to set the scene for you the the Apostle Paul traveling through modern day Turkey and parts of Greece, and he ends up in Athens. And it's kind of almost like a layover, he's waiting for some friends, and he has some time to kill. And so he's gonna do what Paul does, which is to talk to people about Jesus and to share the good news with them. Now, Athens is a city that you just have to say its name, and it evokes a certain image. I could say that Boston is the Athens of New England. And if I said that, you would say, oh, it's because Boston is the, you know, heart of learning up there. I mean, there's, there's MIT there's BC, there's Vu and there's a school in Cambridge, I can't remember its name right now. I think you know, what I'm talking about. It'll come to me later, don't worry.

You could say to

that waco is the Athens of Central Texas, right? Anytime. And Nashville actually does call itself the Athens of the South, right, they have the Parthenon. And so all of this is meant to evoke a certain feeling right? When we say that Athens is this center of learning, it's the center of intellectual inquiry and growth. It's sort of this academic atmosphere in which people want to discuss and debate and they want to ask difficult questions. They want to hear new ideas. And so when Paul shows up at the Areopagus and Athens, the

Athenians want to hear and know more about what he's talking about. They actually think at first in the verses immediately preceding this passage, that he's preaching about a god named Jesus and a god named resurrection. And so they invite him in and say, Tell us more about these these strange foreign gods, we don't know what you're talking about. And then he delivers the discourse that we have here. So we have this image of Athens as this incredibly enlightened and refined place, right? They're sitting around with their wine and their olives, and their feta cheese and their pita bread. And everything is, oh, they're yogurt, of course, as well, right? And everything is just really, you know, sort of this this high society very refined and cultured. And if you've ever read Greek literature, where you get a very different viewpoints, the Greek myths of creation, I can't even talk about and share in this space because they are not appropriate for children. Most of Greek literature is not appropriate for children. In fact, it's very violence. You know, the fathers are overthrowing their fathers and the sons are overthrowing the fathers and the grandfathers there's violent actions and Greek drama done to family members. There's a lot of weird psychological stuff going on, just say Oedipus complex. And maybe some of you know what I'm talking about. Greek epics, the Iliad, the Odyssey, lots of violence, lots of revenge, so satisfying. And so sweets, when Odysseus finally takes care of all the suitors at the end of that epic, but it's a bloodbath. And it starts a new cycle of violence, and the gods just have to step in and stop it at the ends. And then The Gods Themselves they are notoriously unfaithful, fickle, changeable, spontaneous.

And so the Greeks may have given us some positive things that we still carry with us today ideas about democracy, for example. But they also gave us the idea that some people were naturally fitted for a life of slavery. They also gave us a strong distrust of the other, a distrust of foreigners. It's no accident that the word barbarian comes from the way that Greeks would mock people who didn't speak Greek. Because to them, their words just sounded like they were saying Ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba bar. It's true, I promise, Jeff.

So we have this setup here for this intriguing and dramatic encounter between that culture of a sensible sophistication and intellectual life. And Paul, who is bringing forth this different message about

This person, Jesus Christ, myth versus truth, God in Jesus Christ versus Zeus who will win, and they're going to bail it out. That's not exactly what happens.

In delivering his speech to the Athenians, Paul does what he actually says he does elsewhere in his letters, which is to become all things to all people. He offers them a message that they can understand on their level, he accommodates his faith in Jesus, to their philosophical minds, see even quotes lines of Greek poetry back at them.

But at the same time, I want you to consider this that Paul gives them an incredible gift. When he talks about God's grace, He unburdens their heart from this arduous search for God, Greek myth and religion could seem incredibly complex and difficult, and Paul offers to them rather something that is simple. God is not far from each one of us. God created the world in love and redeems the world through Jesus whom God vindicated by raising Him from the dead. This is a message of liberation. For a people who had a reciprocal relationship with their gods, the Greeks and the Romans and many other ancient people thought that you had to offer the gods something, some kind of sacrifice, and then they would in turn, reciprocate and bless you. This is a nervous, anxious religion of duty, it's a treadmill that you can never get off because you never know whether the gods are favoring you, or disfavoring you you never quite know whether you're going to please them or not.

Paul, on the other hand, says there is a simple and profound grace that is given to you as medians, by the God of creation, and in Jesus Christ, God is the creator and sustainer of all life. God doesn't need anything from us. God doesn't need gifts from human hands. Paul says, God, and God alone is the giver. God and God alone is the sustainer of holding our every breath, wheeling the world into being moment by moment. He is not far from each one of us.

Though the passage goes on to say that some of the Greeks who were gathered, scoffed and laughed at Paul, others believed and placed their faith in Jesus. Think about how liberating that journey was for them, they can now rest secure in the knowledge that God loved them, that Jesus redeemed them and that the Holy Spirit was with them always. The truth was so much more beautiful than the myth so much more compelling, so rich and honest about the human condition. So reassuring in its simplicity.

We have the same message we have the same faith. And yet we to continue to make myths.

We to continue to place our faith in false gods, the products of our own imagination.

And so if Paul were to speak to us today, he might say something like this.

Americans, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through your cities and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them, many churches, so many churches, especially in Waco, Texas.

And yet, I found very little that resembled the words and actions of Jesus, I found very little that reminded me of the grace of God that

is freely given for all, I found the worship of many idols. I found that people burned out, tired, weary, cynical, frustrated, distracted, bored, and lonely.

We still at times, refuse to believe that the good news is that God is for us, not against us. We still at times run away from God's open arms rather than toward them. We still at times, close our eyes to the truth that stands right in front of us in order to believe lies that make us feel better, at least temporarily. We still believe that might makes right that winners are better than losers that people unlike us are frightening, and are therefore threats to our existence and our very way of life. We still believe that we have to work to earn God's love. We still believe that we are not worthy of God's love. We still believe that failure equals tragedy.

We still believe that everyone else is better than us. smarter than us more beautiful than us more talented than us and therefore they whoever they are, are worthy of love and praise and even a life of joy.

and abundance, we still believe that if we work just a little bit harder, stretch just a little bit farther we can reach the life promised to us by our great national myths of success. We still believe at times that God is far away, distant, judging, disapproving, angry, disappointed.

I've been thinking about myths a lot this week. Last week, I was out with about 20 of the men from St. Albans, we had a retreat at Camp Island, the theme of which was rest. And we talked about the myths that our culture tells us about rest and work. I remember asking that group, how many of them had internalized the message growing up, that doing nothing was bad, maybe even a sin to rest, to not do anything.

Then last week, in our early risers Bible study, we talked about the paths that our lives take about the various myths that our culture tells us, especially to young people about what success looks like, and what success really constitutes.

And now it's graduation season. And there are many opportunities for young people to continue to hear myths, stories that place the burden on them, stories that blame them, or stories that give false hope and poor consolation for the state of the world.

The mental health crisis facing young people, all of us really, but especially young people today is unprecedented and very real.

It's a combination of many factors exorbitant college tuition and housing costs the constant threat of gun violence in schools and other public places, pandemic schooling, and its after effects the detrimental effects of social media and technology, especially on our

own image of value and self worth, and the rapidly changing climate which promises to reach terrifying levels of crisis in the next century. A witch's brew of toxicity poisonous to the psyche.

Add to that the persistent myth of failure and success. That success is a narrow path consisting of a particular major a particular degree a particular way of life, and that anything short of that is failure.

Young people today feel as though they have to work harder than ever be more special and unique than ever, always grinding, never resting, always moving toward an American Dream that seems only to be more out of reach with every passing year.

We are hungry, all of us and especially young people for a gospel that undercuts all of these myths. A gospel that speaks truth to power, a gospel that measures worth and value not based on degrees, or success or body type or self image, or any other human measure. We are hungry for a gospel that promises unconditional love. We are hungry for a gospel that holds up the reality of the world that is indeed often so frightening and chaotic, nevertheless speaks a profound word of peace.

Jesus says, I give you peace not as the world gives, but as God the Father gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Jesus says Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Jesus says, Do not be afraid, my little flock because God is pleased to give you the kingdom.

And Jesus says I will not leave you the Spirit of truth, not the spirit of myths and lies but the Spirit of Truth lives in you abides with you walks with you in these valleys.

What's done? Does the spirit of truth tell us? The truth is that God is for us. The truth is that God's arms are open wide, constantly and consistently. The truth is that God never leaves us or forsakes us. The truth is that God stands with the weak, the powerless the brokenhearted that God loves losers, failures, and those who don't live up to their potential.

The truth is that God's loving embrace extends to all and that all really means all.

The truth is that God's love is a gift that we are worthy of that gift through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ that failure is not a measure of our work.

Earth, but the chance for a new start. The truth is that we are each fearfully and wonderfully made that you are worthy of love and

abundant life. The truth is that even if you have failed in the eyes of the world, or in your own eyes, God never, ever considers any of us a failure.

The truth is that God is not far from each one of us. God, our loving life giving liberating God is not far from each one of us. God has not left us cut off from grace and love and mercy. God's Spirit of Truth abides with us and is in us. Thanks be to God. Amen.