

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota
April 29, 2018

Acts 17:16-31
John 1:16-18
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The Apostle Paul was traveling around the Middle East introducing the non-Jewish world to the fact that the **Creator of all that is** had come **into this world** in the person of **Jesus Christ**. The **One, true God** has come to give life and salvation to every person in the world. In our text for today, Paul had arrived in **Athens**. This is the city where most of the famous Greek philosophers did their teaching. When Paul toured the city, he discovered that those folks worshiped all kinds of different gods. I read that they had 30,000 statues of various gods in this university city of Athens. Apparently, they didn't want to miss any gods. Paul even discovered one altar dedicated to "**an unknown god**." We have many gods around us today as well.

On MPR'S "**Science Friday**," a couple of weeks ago, I heard a debate. The debate question was, "**Has the evolution of humanity allowed us to let go of the concept of God?**" Two people argued for each side. Prior to the debate starting, the audience was polled. The figure was something like 60% agreed and 40% disagreed with the notion that we no longer need a god. By the end of the debate, the audience results were **70% didn't think we need a god anymore**. God lost big time in this debate.

When I was in college at UMD, over 40 years ago, the Philosophy Department head, also my student advisor, was a crusading atheist. He was a disillusioned former Roman Catholic who regularly taught that Christianity was a hoax. At one point a **debate over the existence of God** was scheduled between the philosophy departments at UMD and St. Scholastica. I missed work so that I could attend. I was quietly cheering for the Catholics. My professor and his colleague blew them out of the water. **God lost that debate too**. However, I well remember my young professor made clear, **you can neither prove, nor disprove the existence of God**.

Paul's world had many gods. They worshiped the sun, the moon, the trees, the mountaintops, the earth, fire, and on and on. Our world has many gods too. In

The Small Catechism, Luther reviews the meaning of the Ten Commandments. Luther teaches that the **first commandment, “You shall have no other gods,”** means, **“We are to fear, love and trust God above anything else.”** **“Fear”** = deep awe and reverence for the Creator of all that is. **“Love”** = resting in the embrace of a God who loves you enough to die for you. **“Trust”** = believing that God loves and cares for you and thereby being set free to follow God’s will for your life. **“Above anything else”** = In short, **anything that is more important to us in our lives than God, becomes our god.**

I well remember a confirmation student 39 years ago, in Outing, Minnesota. Our class had just read through the first commandment. He looked at me and said, **“Hey, no problem, Pastor Darrell, we ain’t got no fat Buddha on our mantle at home.”** He figured as long as we didn’t have some sort of a religious idol sitting around our houses, we didn’t have to worry about this commandment. Okay. On to the next commandment. No. I asked him about his snowmobile. Thirty-nine years ago, in Outing, if you didn’t have a snowmobile, you were dirt. Or what about your favorite athlete, or rock singer, or money? If anything is more important to us than God, it becomes our god. So for the average confirmation student back then, the question was does God even make the top ten most important list?

Anything or anybody that holds sway over our lives, that demands our total commitment/loyalty is our god. Anything or anybody more important to us than God is our god. How does your list look? Who are our gods today? Money? Boss? Power? Athletes? Politicians? Houses? Cars? Trucks? Firearms? Four-wheelers? Peer group? Alcohol? Tobacco? Drugs? Gambling? Food? Job? Reputation? Spouse? Kids? Parents? Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Being in sports? Fish house? Hunting Shack? The Vikings? The Wild? The Timber Wolves? Cell phone? Clothes? Others? Does God make the top ten?

Paul’s world was troubled and violent. Fearsome, powerful men kept the vast majority of the world’s population under their thumb. Many rulers thought they were god themselves. Many people were forced to worship them. Nothing was too wicked for some of those rulers to do in order to expand their power, wealth

or territory. Human life had little value, unless you had the right connections, money or a good sword arm. Does this sound familiar? Is it much different in Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, or Syria? Elsewhere? Is our world getting better or worse in terms of human worth? In terms of survival? Quality of life?

Not many people stood up against **Adolph Hitler** when he came to power in post-World War I Germany. They were a poverty-stricken nation overwhelmed with the reparations that the Allies forced Germany to pay as the loser of WW I. Hitler promised, **“Follow me and I will give you bread.”** **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was a Lutheran pastor who risked his job as pastor of a state church. He risked his family and even life to oppose Hitler. Bonhoeffer refused to let the government control what he was going to be preaching in God’s church. Lutherans have a long history of honoring and obeying those in authority. But, when Hitler started killing the Jews, Bonhoeffer determined that it was less of a sin to kill Hitler than to help Hitler kill the Jews. Hitler was asking the German people to directly violate one of God’s Ten Commandments, **“Thou shalt not kill.”**

Bonhoeffer became a part of the plot to assassinate Hitler. The plot failed. Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp. He was killed just days before the American soldiers liberated that camp. Is God most important in our lives? Or are our leaders? Is God most important in our lives? Or are our things? Is God most important in our lives? Or are our family members, friends or the popular people at school or work?

Paul was so troubled to see all of the different **man-made gods - carved, molded or sculpted idols** - that the people of Athens worshiped. He discovered their altar even to the **“unknown god.”** That’s where Paul stepped in. **“Let me tell you about this god. He is Jesus Christ. He is the Son of the One true God. He is the God who created the very things that you worship.”** There is nothing wrong with trees, sun, moon, mountains and earth. As a matter of fact, these are all gifts given by God Almighty for us to use, enjoy and somehow prosper and pass along to the next generations.

Science is not our enemy. Science is a good gift that God has given us to use in understanding God's world, in finding cures for diseases, in protecting the environment. But, science isn't a god. Money isn't a god. Your job isn't a god. Your spouse, parents or kids are all wonderful, but they are not God. They are amazing gifts to you from God. God is the source of every good gift. **God, the source of life, is worthy of our love, trust, thanksgiving and praise.**

I remember a quote from Father John Powell. I read this in my college days. He said, "**One of the worst heresies of our day is that we love the gift and use the giver, instead of using the gift and loving the giver.**"

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, God doesn't want to take away the good gifts we so enjoy in our lives. God gives them to us. But, God deeply grieves **our loss** when we **let the gifts cloud or block our relationship with the Giver.** God doesn't need us. We need God. **God grieves** when we forget, neglect or abandon the **best gift of all** – God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God - Creator, Savior and Sustainer. God – Good Shepherd, Mother Bird, Breath of Life.

Does our world still need God? Do you still need God?

When our two and four year old grandsons opened their Christmas gifts from Grandma Jennifer and Grandpa Darrell, we watched, hoping to see **delight in their eyes.** And it was there. **Then we delighted** to experience their simple "**thank you**" and **loving hug in response.** **Nothing better than that loving hug.** . . . I think God must feel something like that when God sees me watching the sunrise, catching the fish, holding my grandson, or eating the apple pie. "**Thank you, Lord. I love you, Lord.**"

This morning, I remembered to thank God. You being here now, tells me you must have remembered **who God is** and **where all your good gifts come from too.** **Together,** we thank the Lord. "**Thanks be to God. For all the good gifts.** And most of all, Lord, **thanks for you.** **We believe.**" Amen.