



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“Cross-Culture Missions”

Scripture Lessons: *1 Samuel 5:1-5; Acts 17:16-34*

This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 13, 2022 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

1 Samuel 5:1-5

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod; then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and placed it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

One of the benefits of having the Rev. Graeme Glover visiting with us last Sunday is that we get to learn a little more about the mission of Christ’s Church in an entirely different part of the world.

It is not altogether different from the opportunity we have this morning to hear from Andy Mayo...or to hear this evening, over supper, from Dr. Bob Sloane, a retired surgeon who serves as the Chairman of the Board for MBF.

Learning about mission in places that are far off / hearing perspectives from others who are also about the faithful task of being missional -- it is helpful and hopeful.

Of course, there is a great big world out there that engages similar missional endeavors, though they may not do so from a Christian perspective. What I mean is that there is a great deal of good that is accomplished in the world – people who are good for goodness’ sake (like that Christmas song that I am sure we will start hearing soon); ah, but, friends, that’s not the church / that’s not the Gospel, because the good we do is not for goodness’ sake, but for Christ’s sake!

And that’s an important distinction to make, because, on a day like today, and as we focus on the topic of mission, and on what it means to be cross-cultural in the sense that our identity is rooted and grounded in God’s reconciling work on the cross, we need to realize that this is news to a great many people!

I say this because I for one have come to believe that the world is more pluralistic than it has ever been in our lifetimes! Here in the United States, there used to be a kind of communal and faithful repository / a kind of cultural memory that existed in the heart and soul of many Americans, and all the church needed to do was to locate that little light of mine, as it were...and reignite the spark!

Maybe a grandmother had taken them to church years ago...or perhaps this person showed up at Christmas or Easter, because it was what people did...or maybe they had been

invited to attend a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting when they were in high school.

What I am saying is that there has often been a cultural frame of reference in which the church has operated -- people had at least heard of Jesus, even if they didn't have a personal relationship with him; but now, in many cases - near and far - the church finds herself telling people about Jesus as if for the first time.

And whether she does this in the form of education or medical treatment or an Angel Tree gift -- our opportunity to share with others that it is none other than the love of Christ which compels us to act...that is absolutely critical, because not everyone is so clear as to why mission happens / not everyone understands that it is not our words that we strive to convey, but rather the Word of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

Our NT Lesson this morning comes from Acts 17...Paul has entered the magnificent city of Athens, and it is alive and vibrant, but something else that Paul observes / something from a spiritual perspective...it breaks his heart!

You see, Athens is a spiritual marketplace, a hodgepodge of idols. But before we come down too hard on the Athenians, we should realize that we have no shortage of idols ourselves. Oh, ours may not come in the form of statues and shrines...ours may be a football team or popularity or money...it may be politics.

Upon thinking about the Medical Benevolence Foundation this past Wednesday morning, I was humbled to recall that MBF staffers begin every morning in a virtual meeting and with prayer...and what was particularly humbling for me was that the first thing I did on Wednesday morning was to turn on the television to see the election results.

No, our idols may not be the gods of the Pantheon, but they are no less plentiful, and they are certainly no less problematic, because they divert our attention and our allegiance away from God.

And what's remarkable is that they manage to do this as entities which have absolutely zero power and authority except what we give them. They are all false gods like the one Graham/Michael read about this morning from 1 Samuel chapter 5.

The story goes that when the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant, they stored it overnight next to one of their false gods whose name was Dagon. The next morning, they come to find out that Dagon had fallen...and so they propped him back up.

The next morning, the same thing happened again, but this time the statue of Dagon had been decapitated and his hands had broken off. Alas, the power of idols on full display / needing a hammer and nail to keep them in their places (cf. Jeremiah) ...

All of this the Apostle Paul knew full well as he made his way through the city of Athens -- and as he observes for himself the pervasiveness of idols, let's watch what he does! Let's listen to how he responds! Let's pay careful attention to how Paul effectively engages the culture around him for the sake of Christ!

It's interesting that one of the first things Paul does is to basically say to the Athenians, "You know, I've been wandering around your city, and I have been looking carefully at these objects of worship, and I ran across a shrine with an inscription to an unknown god..."

Paul then essentially says this: "that unknown god that you talk about, I actually know him. Let me tell you about him."

Paul goes on to talk about the Living God / the one he knows and loves / the one who changed his life / the one who existed before the foundation of the world / the one who has shown forth the heavens by his mere understanding!

Oh, upon hearing those words we can just see those Epicurean stoics in our mind's eye /

we can see those Greek philosophers nodding their heads in agreement, because that kind of lofty and heavenly language...it makes sense to them.

Paul goes on to say that, "This God does not live in shrines made by human hands," and, again, we can see those critical thinkers / those rhetorical minds...we can almost hear them saying, "Alright, Paul, I'm with you...so far, so good." Ah, but those are not the only words Paul says!

We need to know that when Paul goes on to say: "This is the God in whom we live and move and have our being," it is of no small consequence that there was a Greek philosopher around that time, named Epimenedes, who was saying much the same thing.

And when Paul said that "We too are his offspring," neither is it of little consequence that there was also a Greek poet of that day saying much the same thing...

It begs the question: Could it be that Paul is referencing their own philosophers and their own poets as he begins to build an argument for the sovereignty of God?

I was at a Young Life banquet about a week ago now...and if you know anything about Young Life, then you know that something of the way that Paul was doing ministry is reflected in the way they do ministry.

They incorporate the songs that the kids love / they talk like the kids talk, and they use language and stories that makes sense to them!

In other words, the staff meets the kids where they are...and then, once they have earned the right to speak, and after they have shown them in their own life what love and forgiveness looks like, then they talk about the love of Jesus!

Paul shows us here and elsewhere the importance of meeting people where they are, but also about the importance of not letting them stay there.

In Acts 13 we find Paul in the synagogue...and what might we think is going to resonate with people in a synagogue? Well, the OT, of course! ...And so, in Acts 13 it is the OT which serves as Paul's point of entry into mission -- he talks about Moses, and how they are brothers and sisters...he talks about how it is that together they are descendants of Abraham...he goes on to talk about how David, having lived this life of faith, died, was buried next to his ancestors, and experienced corruption / his earthly body decayed.

But Paul doesn't stop there! Oh, he may have entered into that conversation by talking about how David experienced corruption...but where he goes with that conversation is to express that the one whom God hath raised from the dead did not experience corruption!

Paul does the same thing with the Athenians here in Acts 17...he enters into their world / he uses their language, but notice that he doesn't leave the story somewhere in the heavens / he doesn't leave them to think that their story ends with an altar to an unknown God.

You see, Paul lets it be known that those times when God's drama of redeeming love was not fully understood...ah, those times have come and gone.

What's more, Paul lets it be known that God has fixed a time in the future when the world will be judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed...and that about that blessed future, God has provided proof by raising Jesus from the dead.

I find the way that Paul expressed the beauty and breadth of the Gospel is so important! He doesn't stand on his soap box and lecture the Athenians, ex cathedra...he meets the Athenians on their turf / he finds out what their needs are and what matters to them / he learns their story / he speaks their language / and perhaps most important of all...he listens before he speaks...and when he does speak, by God's grace, he speaks in a way that the people can understand him!

What a challenge for the church today! ...To get out into that Athens of ours and actively

and effectively engage it / to be about the very mission of God; though I think Paul would also be quick to assert that ours is not simply a responsibility to address the needs of the world – an atheist can do that! No! Ours is a matter of addressing the needs of the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Yes there is a capacity on the part of the hearer to claim God's love for themselves, but there is also a capacity on our part / a responsibility on our part...to effectively share the message of salvation...to take the story of someone's life and to help them make sense of it...to help them see that is chocked full of meaning and purpose at a deep and abiding level; ah, but that will only happen when a person begins to understand their own life's story in light of God's story of salvation. That is our mission, 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.