

Everything and nothing

Acts 17:16-34

May 29, 2011

What do you believe in?

Do you believe in working hard? In the free market economy? In cleaning up your own messes?

Do you believe in love? In liberty and justice for all? In fate?

Do you believe in God?

A recent Harris Poll found that 82% of Americans believe in God, more than four out of every five of us. The same poll found that 42% of us believe in ghosts, that 26% of us believe in astrology, and that 20% of us believe in reincarnation.

You do realize, don't you, what this poll means? It means that there are those among us who believe in God and ghosts, who believe in God and astrology, who believe in God and reincarnation. In fact, there may well be some among us who believe in God and astrology and ghosts and reincarnation and ... whatever!

We believe in lots of things. 39% of Americans believe in the prophecies of Nostradamus, 26% of us believe spiritual energy resides in mountains or trees or crystals, 25% of us believe in knocking on wood to avoid misfortune, and 73% of American youth have engaged in some kind of psychic or witchcraft-related activity.

We believe in lots of things. Any one of us just might believe in just about anything.

We believe in UFO's and Bigfoot. We believe in extra-sensory perception and in the ability to communicate with dead people.

We believe in karma and tarot cards and yoga. We believe in Oprah.

There are among us Christians and Hindus and Muslims and Wiccans, Buddhists and Mormons and Rastafarians and goddess-worshippers, Moonies and Scientologists and Bahai's and Satanists, and those who mix and match their religious allegiances in all kinds of different ways.

We believe in just about anything. In 21st century America, we believe in just about everything.

1st century Athens was a lot like 21st century America. Rome was by then the political hub of the known world, but Athens was still very much one of the leading cities for culture and science and art and ideas. The Athenians were intelligent and sophisticated. They were avid observers of the current world scene and insatiable consumers of the latest fashion, in clothing or philosophy or religion. Luke writes of them: “[They] liked to spend all their time telling and hearing the latest new thing.” Sound familiar?

Paul found himself in Athens, with some time on his hands. He was in the middle of the second of his three extended missionary journeys, waiting in Athens for Timothy and Silas to join him before moving on to Corinth. While he waited, he toured the city and was very distressed with what he saw -- idols. Idols here, idols there, idols everywhere! He saw a city filled with people -- like us -- people who believe in just about anything, people who believe in just about everything.

So he engaged them. He didn't so much confront them, but he engaged them. He engaged the people of Athens in conversation and debate. He talked with them in the synagogue and in the streets, in the public square. He talked with Jews and God-fearing Greeks, and he debated Stoics and Epicurean philosophers.

And always he talked about the same things he talked about wherever he went. He talked about the Good News, the Good News about Jesus, the Messiah, the One whom God had raised from death.

Only, it seems, the Athenians confused things a bit. They filtered Paul's message through their own familiar religious categories and figured he was introducing them to two new gods they might add to their always growing pantheon of gods: a god named Jesus, and a goddess named Resurrection!

They were eager to know more -- Paul and his strange new gods were, after all, the latest new thing -- so they brought him before the city council to discuss matters in a more formal setting.

“I see you Athenians are very religious,” Paul began. Duh! That's an understatement! They've got religion in all sizes and shapes and colors!

But notice how he began -- with a positive statement, making a point of contact with them. Paul begins where they are: “I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious.”

But quickly Paul turned his attention to one particular religious artifact, one specific Athenian shrine, an altar that was inscribed with these words: "To an Unknown God." It was just one altar among many scattered throughout the city, but Paul highlighted this one because he understood that when you believe in everything, you really believe in nothing.

You believe in this, you believe in that. You take a little bit of this, you take a little bit of that. You taste and you sample and you dabble, but you give yourself ... to nothing. An unknown God has no claim on you. How could you be obligated in any way to a god you don't know? Why should you have to change in any way to please a God you know nothing about? This is safe religion, easy religion, painless religion. In other words, no religion at all!

That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you!

Paul began where they were, within the comfort zone of their own religious sensibilities, even quoting their own Greek poets and philosophers, but now he takes them to a new place, a really new place, a place entirely outside their comfort zone. He tells them of a God he knows, a God they can know, a God who makes himself known to us, a God who expects us, all of us, to know him and love him.

This is not a nameless and formless god, but a particular God with a particular name, a particular God made known through a particular man, through the man God raised from death, Jesus.

This is not an unknown god, not one god among many, but the One God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the One from whom all things come, the One from whom everyone receives life and breath and everything else they have!

This is a God who does have a claim on us! This is a God who holds us accountable, a God who expects us to know him as he has been revealed to us, and in knowing him, to turn from our evil ways and to follow instead his own just ways.

That's the God Paul told them about. The response among the Athenians was mixed. Some scoffed at him, some wanted to hear more from him, and some believed and left with him. Some believed, because at that moment, through Paul's words or the illumination of the Holy Spirit, they saw God. They saw the God who claimed them, the God to whom they owed everything they had and everything they were.

Among those who believed, Luke mentions Dionysius and Damaris. Dionysius was a member of the council, certainly a man of power and prestige, named for one of the most popular of the Greek gods. Damaris too was named for a god and must have been a woman of means and of high social standing since she was welcomed among that elite company.

They believed. Dionysius and Damaris believed. They believed, even though it meant leaving: leaving their places at the council, almost certainly leaving their places among the cream of Athenian aristocracy, leaving the life they had known and made for themselves for a life they knew yet little about, a life that would be made for them by the God who laid claim to them.

They left with Paul. They left to follow Jesus.

What do you believe in?

What do you believe in amidst a society filled with people enamored with the latest new thing, a society filled with tasters and samplers and dabblers?

What do you believe in in a land filled with idols -- idols here, idols there, idols everywhere -- malls and theaters and stadiums and banks their temples?

What do you believe in?

One god among many? A generic, catchall sort of god? An easy god? A god you can keep on a shelf or hang on the wall or carry around in your back pocket? A god who is little more than just one more of your many resources, something that may prove useful in getting you what you want? A god just amorphous enough, just ambiguous enough, just out of reach enough, just unknowable enough, to require nothing of you?

Or do you believe in the one God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the God who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from death?

Do you believe in the one God who made you, the God who gave you life and breath, the God who lays claim to you, soul and body?

Do you believe in the one God who commands you to know him and love him and serve him?

Do you believe only in what you can fashion by your own art and skill and imagination? Or do you believe in the One who fashioned you?

Our Lord and God!

*You alone are worthy
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will, we were given life!*