

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Acts 17:16-34
August 9, 2026

The Gospel Spreads to Athens

Well, good morning! To those I have not met, I look forward to getting to know you. To those who missed me, I missed you too. And to those who wished this sabbatical would never end...well, I'm back.

Rested. Renewed. Refreshed. And ready to hit the ground running.
Sort of.

Just know that it takes a little time to find your mojo after being gone for three months. I'm still trying to remember where I put mine.

But seriously, thank you for the incredible gift of sabbatical. I do not take it for granted. It was a tremendous gift, and I'm deeply grateful to you as a congregation for allowing me that time.

And can you believe that on August 1, I completed my twenty-first year as your pastor?

Twenty-one years!

I still love this church. I love our people. I love this community. And I love the unique way God has called us to make an impact for Jesus here in Clark County.

I have lots of sabbatical stories to share with you over the next several weeks. Some of them are spiritual. Some are theological. And some of them are just embarrassing.

We began our sabbatical by spending two weeks traveling through small towns in southern England and Wales.

I had driven a car in England before, so I thought, "I've got this." Except this time not only would I be driving on the other side of the road...from the other side of the car...it would be with a stick shift...using my left hand. That was a game changer.

Everything went pretty well until I got to my first roundabout.

Now, in England, when you're driving on the left side of the road, you have to look right first before entering the roundabout.

Here in America, we look left.

So I entered the roundabout just fine. But then my brain sort of froze. I couldn't figure out how to get out. So there we were...going around...and around...and around. Karen is sitting beside me wondering if she should call the rental car company and tell them we may never be returning.

Finally, I figured it out. And we escaped. I'm happy to report that my driving improved dramatically after that.

But even today, when I see a roundabout, a little voice in my head says: "First look right."

I share that because sometimes following Jesus feels a little bit like driving in a roundabout.

We know we're moving. We know we're supposed to be going somewhere. But sometimes we aren't quite sure if we are making any progress. We just seem like we are going around...and around...and around.

And that brings us to Acts 17.

Before I left on sabbatical, we introduced the first half of the book of Acts, narrated by the Bible Project. Today I want us to see the second half so we can get the larger picture of where the story is going.

[Show Bible Project video.]

We pick up the story where we left off last week. Paul and Silas miraculously escaped from prison in Philippi. The jailer and his household became followers of Jesus and were baptized. Paul and Silas then traveled to Thessalonica, where a group of jealous religious leaders stirred up trouble against them.

They fled to Berea. But the angry mob followed them there.

So Paul eventually slipped away and ended up in Athens. And Athens was a very different place.

If Thessalonica was an emotional powder keg, Athens was the subdued intellectual capital of the ancient world.

This is me standing on the Areopagus when I was last in Greece. The Areopagus was a rock mound at the base of the Acropolis where people would come to share new ideas and debate them. And this is where we find Paul in our story today.

So listen with me to Acts 17:16–34.

16 Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens. He was very upset to see that the city was full of statues of gods. **17** So he went to the synagogue. There he talked both with Jews and with Greeks who worshiped God. Each day he spoke with anyone who happened to be in the market place. **18** A group of Epicurean and Stoic thinkers began to argue with him. Some of them asked, "What is this fellow chattering about?" Others said, "He seems to be telling us about gods we've never heard of." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus. He was telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead. **19** They took him to a meeting of the Areopagus. There they said to him, "What is this new teaching

you're giving us? **20** You have some strange ideas we've never heard before. We would like to know what they mean." **21** All the people of Athens spent their time talking about and listening to the latest ideas. People from other lands who lived there did the same.

22 Then Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus. He said, "People of Athens! I see that you are very religious in every way. **23** As I walked around, I looked carefully at the things you worship. I even found an altar with

To an Unknown God

written on it. So you don't know what you are worshiping. Now I am going to tell you about this 'unknown god.'

24 "He is the God who made the world. He also made everything in it. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn't live in temples built by human hands.

25 He is not served by human hands. He doesn't need anything. Instead, he himself gives life and breath to all people. He also gives them everything else they have.

26 From one man he made all the people of the world. Now they live all over the earth. He decided exactly when they should live. And he decided exactly where they should live. **27** God did this so that people would seek him. And perhaps they would reach out for him and find him. They would find him even though he is not far from any of us. **28** 'In him we live and move and exist.' As some of your own poets have also said, 'We are his children.'

29 "Yes, we are God's children. So we shouldn't think that God is made out of gold or silver or stone. He isn't a statue planned and made by clever people. **30** In the past, God didn't judge people for what they didn't know. But now he commands all people everywhere to turn away from their sins. **31** He has set a day when he will judge the world fairly. He has appointed a man to be its judge. God has proved this to everyone by raising that man from the dead."

32 They heard Paul talk about the dead being raised. Some of them made fun of this idea. But others said, "We want to hear you speak about this again." **33** So Paul left the meeting of the Areopagus. **34** Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed in Jesus. Dionysius was one of them. He was a member of the Areopagus. A woman named Damaris also became a believer. And so did some others.

Let us pray. [Prayer of Illumination]

There are four questions I want us to explore this morning: Who was Paul's congregation in Athens? What was his message to them? What happened as a result? And ultimately, what does this tell us about being followers of Jesus today?

First, let's look at Paul's audience. Paul arrived in Athens and began walking around the city. And he noticed something. The city was filled with idols. There

were temples everywhere. Statues everywhere. Religious shrines everywhere. And Paul was deeply troubled by what he saw.

So he did what Paul normally did. He first went to the synagogue and shared the Good News about Jesus with his Jewish people. But then he went into the marketplace and talked with whoever would listen. And eventually he encountered two groups of philosophers: the Epicureans and the Stoics.

These were the intellectuals of Athens. The educated people. The thinkers. The debaters. The people who enjoyed discussing the meaning of life over a really long cup of coffee. In other words, Portland hipsters.

The Epicureans believed that the way to find peace was to withdraw from the chaos of public life and enjoy life in moderation. The Stoics believed that peace came through self-control, virtue, discipline, and living responsibly within society.

Two different approaches to finding peace.

But both were trying to answer the same fundamental human question:

How do we find peace in a world that doesn't seem very peaceful? Sound familiar? It should. Because people are still asking that question. We just have different ways of answering it.

Some people pursue pleasure. Some pursue achievement. Some pursue money. Some pursue knowledge. Some pursue relationships. Some pursue success. Some pursue political causes. Some pursue control. And some of us pursue all of the above simultaneously.

But underneath all of it is the same longing: How do we find peace?

The Athenians were searching for answers. And Paul walked right into the middle of that search.

Now Luke tells us something interesting about the people of Athens. He says: "All the people of Athens spent their time talking about and listening to the latest ideas."

They loved new ideas. They loved discussion. They loved debate. They loved intellectual stimulation. And honestly, there are worse things to be known for. Right?

But there is a danger in constantly pursuing the next idea. We can spend our entire life talking about truth without ever actually surrendering to it. We can analyze Christianity to the nth degree without ever following Christ. We can study Jesus without ever truly knowing him. We can debate faith without ever exercising faith. And that was exactly what Paul encountered in Athens.

This was Paul's audience.

But what exactly did Paul share with them? He began by acknowledging their spiritual hunger. He said: "People of Athens! I see that you are very religious in every way." Paul doesn't insult them. He doesn't say, "You people are idiots."

Paul began by finding common ground. He walked around and noticed an altar dedicated “To an Unknown God.” The Greek word used here for unknown is *agonostos*. Where we get the word agnostic. In other words, the belief that there may be a god, or there may not be a god. So I’m indifferent to it.

Think about it with me for a moment. That is fascinating. For a culture that worshipped knowledge or *Sofia* in Greek to admit that some things were beyond human understanding is mind boggling. And Paul said, essentially: “You’ve already admitted that there is something you don’t know. Let me tell you about Him.”

That was brilliant. Paul started where they are. He spoke their language. He quoted their poets. He used their philosophical categories. He connected the gospel to the questions they were already asking. And then he told them about the God they didn’t know.

He told them that this God: created the heavens and the earth and everything in it, gave life and breath to everyone, was not confined to temples, was not dependent upon human beings, and was not far from any of us.

And then Paul quoted one of their own poets: “For in him we live and move and have our being.” And: “We are his offspring.”

Paul was saying: “You’re closer to the truth than you realize. The God you are searching for has already revealed himself.”

And then Paul got to the heart of the gospel. Jesus. He told them that God appointed Jesus to judge the world and that God demonstrated this by raising Jesus from the dead. And that’s where things got interesting. Because the resurrection was not merely another philosophical idea. Paul wasn’t offering them another theory to debate. The concept of a bodily resurrection from the dead was so foreign to the Greeks that they didn’t even understand the term that Paul used. *Anastasin*. They thought he was saying the name of some other god.

But he was actually making a claim about reality.

Jesus Christ was dead.

Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

Jesus Christ is now Lord of heaven and earth.

They had to decide what they were going to do with that truth.

So What Happened? And this is where I love this passage. Because the response is incredibly realistic. Some people laughed. Some people rejected it. Some people said, “We want to hear more.” And some people believed. In other words: Exactly what happens whenever we share the gospel today.

Folks, not everybody respond the same way. Some people will be skeptical. Some will be curious. Some will be dismissive. Some will ask questions. Some will want to know more. And some will believe.

Luke tells us that Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, believed. A woman named Damaris believed. And several others believed as well.

But here's the interesting thing. As far as we know, Athens did not become a great Christian center. Paul didn't establish a giant megachurch there. Notice that there isn't a chapter in Acts called "The First Presbyterian Church of Athens."

So seeming like Paul's message got little traction, he moved on to Corinth. By human standards, his ministry in Athens might have looked like a failure. Sure he gave a brilliant sermon. He had an intelligent audience. He used their language. He quoted their poets. He reasoned with them. And only a handful of people responded.

If we measured ministry the way our culture measures success, we might look at Paul and say: "Paul, you need to work on your numbers buddy. Perhaps even change your marketing approach."

But God doesn't measure ministry the way we do. God measures faithfulness. Paul did exactly what Jesus called him to do. He proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles. He trusted the Holy Spirit. And he left the results with God. That is incredibly freeing. Because it means that our job is faithfulness too, not outcomes.

Our job as Christians is to love. Our job is to serve. Our job is to pray. Our job is to tell the story of Jesus. Our job is to live faithfully. Our job is to be witnesses. But we cannot make someone believe. That's God's job.

Another thing that this text tells us is that the Gospel doesn't require us to have all the answers. This is especially important for us today. Because sometimes we make faith much harder than it needs to be.

We may think: "I need to understand everything before I can follow Jesus." "I need to have all my questions answered." "I need to know how to defend Christianity intellectually." "I need to understand the Bible completely." "I need to resolve every doubt."

But here's the thing: You don't have to understand everything to follow Jesus. Faith doesn't mean having every question answered. Faith means trusting the One who does.

It's like in marriage. When Karen and I got married, I knew a lot about her. And she knew a lot about me. But we certainly didn't know everything.

If we had insisted on knowing everything about each other before we got married, we'd still be waiting.

Marriage begins with trust. And over the years, as you live together, you learn more and more about the person you've committed your life to.

That's true of our relationship with Jesus. We don't begin with complete understanding. We begin with trust. We say: "Jesus, I believe you are Lord. I want to follow you. Teach me. Change me. Lead me." And then we spend the rest of our lives getting to know Him.

Paul eventually writes to the Corinthians about what he learned in Athens. He says: “The wisdom of God is wiser than human wisdom.” And: “We preach Christ crucified.”

That is the heart of our message. Not our brilliance. Not our programs. Not our clever arguments. Not our ability to win debates. Jesus Christ crucified. Risen. Alive. And transforming people.

The gospel does not call us to be impressive or attractive. It calls us to be faithful.

It does not require us to have every answer. It calls us to know Jesus.

It does not ask us to control outcomes. It calls us to trust God with them.

So let me say it as clearly as I can as we begin this next season of ministry together: Let us follow Jesus. Fully. Simply. Daily.

Not halfway. Not occasionally. Not only when it’s convenient or comfortable. But with our whole life.

May we trust Him when it makes sense—and when it doesn’t. May we obey Him when it’s easy—and when it costs us a lot. May we speak about Him when it feels natural—and when it feels awkward. May we just keep following Jesus. Because that’s what discipleship is.

And maybe that’s why I keep thinking about that roundabout.

We can spend so much of life circling—thinking, analyzing, planning, trying to find the perfect path forward on our own. And Jesus doesn’t stand at the edge of the road shouting directions. He steps into the circle and says: “Stop circling. Trust me. Come with me.”

So here is the invitation as we leave today:

Don’t just admire Jesus. Follow Him.

Don’t just study Jesus. Know Him.

Don’t just believe things about Jesus. Surrender your life to Him.

And then walk with Him—one step at a time and begin to see how he transforms you from the inside out.

Amen.