

*Will Any God Do?*

Acts 17:16-34

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A pastor was sitting in his New York City church when a stranger walked in. The man asked if he could light a candle. Before the pastor could say anything, the man added, “By the way, what kind of church is this?” The pastor replied, “Lutheran” and opened his mouth to explain. But the stranger cut him off, “Not that it makes any difference,” he said, “I don’t favor any particular kind of religion. Whenever I pass a place of worship, I like to stop, light a candle, and plug into the divine. Really, any god will do.”

I believe God has created in each of us a thirst for the divine. As a consequence, you can travel to Machu Picchu in Peru and find an altar where the Incas worshipped the Sun god. Or you can go to Tanzania and hear the Maasai tribe tell of a creator god who’s connected to earth by a giant umbilical chord. Or you can simply travel to downtown Rochester and observe Muslims down on their knees praying to Allah in the direction of Mecca.

Clearly there are many paths that people use to approach the divine. We see this in Acts 17 as Paul makes an unexpected stop in Athens. Paul is there because his preaching has caused riots in the towns of Thessolonica and Borocea. His followers insist that he leave the area and go to Athens until the storm blows over.

Paul doesn’t exactly lay low, however. He starts poking around the city. He finds a bustling marketplace, philosophers on practically every street corner, an abundance of glistening white temples. As Paul walks along, he’s amazed—and to some extent dismayed—by the dozens and dozens of gods and goddesses. If a god is defined as *anything of ultimate concern*, then the Athenians have more than their share of ultimate concerns. They have names such as Aphrodite, Poseidon, Zeus. Their images are fashioned out of marble and silver and gold. The citizens of Athens approach them a little like consumers going to the market. They pray to whatever god can help them the most.

As Paul makes his way through the city, he suddenly stumbles upon an altar with a curious inscription: “To an unknown God.” Hmm. It sounds like the Athenians are hedging their bets. It sounds like they want to make sure they offer prayers to every god they can think of and even some they can’t. It sounds like, when caught between a rock and a hard place, almost *any god will do*.

What Paul probably doesn’t know is that six hundred years earlier there was a devastating plague in Athens. People were dying by the thousands. It was assumed that one of the Athenian gods was angry at them. Since no one knew which god it was, they did what we often do when looking for advice—call in a consultant. His name was Epimenides. After a thorough investigation, Epimenides concluded that none of the *known* gods had been offended. The plague must have been caused by some *unknown* god.

So now what? In an effort to appease this angry god, Epimenides instructed them to let loose hungry sheep all over the city. Wherever the sheep lay down, without first eating grass, they built an altar to this *unknown* god. Then, unfortunately for the sheep, they sacrificed them on the altar. And according to legend, the deadly plague began to subside almost immediately.

From the sounds of it, these Athenians were a rather superstitious bunch. I mean, we moderns are much too sophisticated to do anything quite so primitive, right? Well...I know someone who, every time she boards an airplane, makes the sign of the cross and pats the plane three times. I know someone who never washes his golf ball on a hole with a water hazard for fear of tempting the golf gods. I know someone who wears the same football jersey and sits in the same chair and eats the same food for every Viking game (how do you think that’s been working out this year, by the way?) The way we carry on sometimes, it’s almost as if *any god will do* for us too, as long as that god brings us a little good luck.

Notice what Paul says about these sorts of superstitions. He doesn’t belittle them. Instead he uses them to make a connection. As he looks at the altar to an unknown god, he says to the Athenians: “I can see that you’re a very religious people. You’re so religious that you worship a god you don’t even know.”

By now Paul has their full attention. He attempts to put a name and a face to this unknown god. He says: “Perhaps this god of yours is the same God I believe in, the creator of heaven and earth. If so, you should know that this God doesn’t live in temples made by human hands. No, this God is big and powerful and beyond any human imagination.”

Do you see where this conversation is going? Paul is making the case for one supreme God. His efforts remind me of a story that once was popular among Hindus in India. A group of blind men encounter an elephant for the first time. They do their best to describe the elephant. One man touches the elephant’s leg and says, “It’s like a tree.” Another feels its trunk and exclaims “No, it’s like a giant python.” A third encounters the swishing tail and says “No, it’s like a rope!” The point of the story? God is like that elephant. We might search for God, but none of us have the capacity to see God in all of God’s fullness. God is simply too big.

Again, in the midst of all the gods and goddesses, Paul is arguing for one supreme God. But he leaves a little crack for this great big God to come close to us. “You are searching for God,” he says, “That’s a good thing. God may seem big and beyond all knowing, but he’s really not. The God I’m talking about is not far from any of you. Indeed, in this God you live and move and have your being.”

Paul goes a step further. He brings up the R-word: repentance. “The creator of heaven and earth holds people accountable,” he says. “Someday you will have to stand before your maker. When you do, *not just any god will do*. In fact, *only one God will do*: the one who has come near to us in Jesus.”

Notice what happens next. The minute Paul brings up repentance and judgment and Jesus, the conversation quickly goes downhill. Pretty soon people pack up their folding chairs and head home. Oh, a few of them promise to come back later and hear more. A couple of them become believers. But the vast majority openly laugh at Paul. They clearly aren’t buying what he is trying to sell.

So, what are we to make of this strange story from Acts? Here’s what I think: We’re probably not so different from those ancient Athenians. If we define a god as anything of ultimate concern, then we too are a religious people. We have plenty of gods and goddesses. Instead of having names like Aphrodite or Poseidon or Zeus, however,

they have names like Adrian Peterson or Taylor Swift or Leonardo DiCaprio, or names like Upward Mobility or Career Advancement or Dow Jones.

Like the ancient Greeks, we often approach our gods as consumers. We're concerned, first and foremost, with what we might get out of this relationship. We're not worried about deadly plagues, of course, but we *are* worried about market meltdowns and terrorist bombings and midterm elections and family breakdowns and health issues. As we face these fears, we pray for somebody out there to look after us, somebody to give us a little peace of mind, somebody to bail us out when our team is down by three runs and it's the bottom on the ninth. Be honest, people: Does it really matter which god it is, as long as your needs get met? Will just about any god do for you?

What Paul eventually gets around to telling us, I think, is that there's a vast difference between a religion of consumerism and a religion of repentance. One says, "If it feels good, go for it." The other sets out to change us from inside out. Ultimately, the Christianity Paul is preaching is not so much about making us *feel* better as making us *be* better. It's about turning us into fully devoted followers of Jesus.

Friends, we live in a world that is changing rapidly. It's a little like Paul's world. We're aware like never before that Christianity is only one of dozens of religions. Many in our society are increasingly resistant to the truth claims that churches are making. People might not be laughing at us, but like Paul in Athens, we know that lots of folks have packed up their folding chairs and gone home.

So how do we live in such a world? We take our cue from Paul. Paul didn't belittle or shame people for their various beliefs. Rather, he engaged them in dialog. He attempted to build bridges instead of walls. Paul had firm convictions, to be sure, but—at least with the Athenians—he shared them less like he was wielding a club and more like he was extending an invitation to a party.

In an increasingly pluralistic world, we need to follow Paul's lead and be aware of our convictions. We need to ask ourselves: Does it really matter how we live and where we worship and in whom we believe? *Will any god do* for us? If the answer is *yes, any God will do*, then our situation will be a little like that story of the elephant, and we'll feel like we're each hanging on to a little piece of the divine. But if the answer is *no, only one*

*God will do*, then we might want to think seriously at what it is we believe about that God.

Here's a thought: How about putting your trust, your deep-down, day-in-and-day-out, my-life-depends upon-it trust, in the one supreme God who comes near to us in Jesus? If you put your trust in this God, you won't necessarily have answers to all of life's questions, but you will have someone who promises to look after you and to give you peace of mind and—once in a great while—maybe even to bail you out when you're down by three runs and it's the bottom of the ninth.

A word of caution, though: If you *do* put your trust in this God, he's going to want to call you to repentance and to change your life; he's going to want to turn you into a fully devoted follower of Jesus; he's going to want you to invite others to join the party. AMEN.