



THIS IS MY CHURCH *IS THIS MY GOD?* *Acts 17.16-34*

Stewardship IV (Ded. Sunday)---November 20, 2005---Dr. Mark James Toone---Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

We're going to start with a little audience participation this morning. If you had to choose a single city that represented the cultural and intellectual and religious capital of the world, what would it be? (Answers) Pastor Stuart said, "Walla Walla." It is absolutely no exaggeration to say that when Paul arrived in Athens, he had arrived at the cultural, intellectual and religious capital of his world.

Paul was a well traveled, well educated man of his time. Still, his first glimpse of Athens must have been jaw-dropping. I know how he felt. When I got off the airplane in in 1976 and first laid eyes on Bakersfield....wow! The Athenian architecture was magnificent. When we climb the steps of the Acropolis next spring, we will see a vestige of the gleaming marble that Paul beheld: The Erechtheum (picture); the Athena Nike Temple (picture); and, of course, the crown jewel of Athens, the Parthenon. (picture) Sculpture (picture-Winged Victory, Samothrace) reached its zenith in Greece prior to the birth of Jesus and the world and would not rise to similar heights again until the Renaissance, 1500 years later!

Athens was also the world center for philosophy. The person who has never taken a class in philosophy still knows the names of the Athenian giants: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. (pictures) Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum, the greatest centers of Greek learning, were still flourishing when Paul set foot in Athens. The two dominant schools of philosophy at the time are mentioned in our text: Epicureanism and Stoicism. They were essentially opposites. Put simply, Epicureans believed that the pursuit of pleasure was the highest good. Stoics, on the other hand, sought to avoid extremes of emotion, by reaching a state of thinking that they called "apatheia." (Does that word sound familiar? Apathy.) Athens was also a center for art and literature. Even in a time when Rome controlled an empire more vast than the world had ever known, it was Greek thought and language and culture that continued to dominate the world.

So, when Paul walked into Athens that day, his senses were flooded. But one thing hit him hardest of all. What? The idols. The English translation of verse 16 doesn't do justice to the Greek. Literally, the text says that Athens was "under" idols. That is, it was "smothered" with idols or "swamped" with idols. Everywhere you turned there was an idol to a pagan god. In the Parthenon stood a huge statue to Athena. It was made of gold and ivory and its gleaming golden spear point was said to be seen from 40 miles away. Elsewhere were idols to Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune and Diana. Just to cover all their bases, there was even one idol to the "agnostos theos"... the "unknown



god.” One Roman writer once wrote of Athens, “It is easier to find a god there than a man.”

More than ten years ago I traveled to India where I preached to a gathering of itinerant Christian evangelists. While there, we visited a famous Hindu temple. Our Christian hosts got us to the front gate but would not go inside with us. “There are too many demonic forces inside,” they said. But I wanted to experience it so, after a fervent prayer for protection, I went in. It was one of the darkest spiritual experiences of my life. To watch as worshippers danced and rocked trances before idols of rats and cattle and snakes. It was very spooky...and very unsettling... and very sad.

Now put yourself in Paul’s shoes. Here is a Pharisee, a Jew who prided himself on the keeping of the Law. And what was the second of the Ten Commandments? You shall not make any graven images. No idols! Reach into your pocket and pull out any coin you find there. See that picture? Of Abe or George or Frank or Tom? Idolatry. A Jew would never have such money. In fact, that was one of the reasons that they needed money changers in the temple...to convert idolatrous, image-bearing foreign coin into money that did not break the second commandment. When Pontius Pilate first took control of Palestine, his soldiers marched in carrying the military insignia that bore the image of Caesar. The Jews were so outraged that they rushed toward the soldiers, falling to their knees before them and tearing open their robes and inviting them to drive their swords into their bare chests...or remove the offensive image. Pilate took down the insignia.

THAT is how big a deal idolatry was to the Jews. THAT is how big a deal idolatry was to Paul. When verse 16 says that Paul was “greatly distressed,” that doesn’t do it justice. The actual word means convulsions. Paul had internal, emotional convulsions when he saw how this great city was smothered in idols. So he shared the good news of HIS God, his ONE God, Jesus. He shared Jesus with the Epicureans and the Stoics. They made fun of him. They called him a “babblers.” A parrot. Literally, a seed-picker. A charlatan who stole one idea from this place, another from another. Nothing like their sophisticated belief systems. Then Paul spoke to the Aeropagus, a group of the intellectual elites of Athens. He told them about a God, not made with human hands. The creator and Lord of the universe. A loving and compassionate God who sent his son Jesus. A God who has tolerated ignorance but who will one day sit in judgment over the whole earth. Their response? They blew Paul off. They sneered. They dismissed him.

Athens was Paul’s greatest failure. He planted no church there. He received few converts. Athens was too rich, too proud, too elite, too sophisticated for this parrot; this seed-picker. It was a tough place to preach the truth about the one true God.

So is Gig Harbor...for many of the same reasons. We live in magnificent homes, temples really, the kinds of structures that Mexicans living in cardboard shacks or Indians who



live in huts of manure could never even imagine. We are a culture of Epicureans. Pleasure-seeking is our national obsession, isn't that true? And ironically, we are also apathetic. In our headlong pursuit of pleasure, we are indifferent to the vast majority of the world that is struggling and suffering. And like the Athenians, we are an idolatrous culture. We worship celebrity and we worship beauty and we worship sports and we worship wealth and we worship power.

So...what do you worship? What is your god? What is the object of your devotion? Is it your business, your body, your passions, your wealth? It is here that we come to **the** core question. Over the last few weeks we have been repeating the words, "This is MY church." I was at Costco Friday and I met two different Chapel Hill couples who were wearing their purple bracelets. (I was embarrassed. I had left mine on my nightstand!) But we've also asked ourselves some questions. IS this my church? IS this my mission?

But today, on this Dedication Sunday, we ask the single most important question of all: Is THIS my God? Is Jesus Christ MY God? For if he is not, all of this is just rhetoric. If Jesus is not my God, I won't care about his church or his mission.

For Paul's listeners in Athens, he was not. In fact, they mocked Paul. It all seemed so ridiculous. Their gods were much more impressive, much more powerful, much more sophisticated. Paul pulled out all the stops; he used every clever rhetorical and logical device he could to convince his listeners that their gods of silver and gold were dead; that Jesus Christ was the only God worth believing in. And they mocked him. They called him a parrot. A seed-picker.

Perhaps they were contemptuous of the fact that Paul's god had no image, no idol, no monument in his honor. How great a god could he be, after all? But Paul's God DOES have monuments. They just aren't made with human hands. Paul's God does have monuments. And as a matter of fact, you've been admiring them all morning. There was the monument of children who are giving their money to support children in Swaziland. There was a monument of teenagers who are leading us in worship. There was the monument of soldiers' gratitude because our devotion to Paul's God calls us to pray for and support our men and women who place themselves in harm's way. There was a monument of 34 new members who have joined this church because they have discovered what it means to be a part of a loving family. There was the monument of a couple in the first service, a couple who come from a hard background of drugs and alcohol and violence... a couple who started coming to church here, who discovered the love of God here, who got married here, who were baptized here this morning and who had their children baptized here this morning... a couple who said to me on Thursday, "This church was LIFE for us."



How's that for monuments? How's that for a tribute to Paul's God...to OUR God, Jesus Christ? Here's another monument. I received it late Friday night:

Hi Pastor Mark,

My family has been attending Chapel Hill since we moved to the area 3 years ago. This is my first letter ever to a pastor so I am a little nervous (grin).

I just wanted to say thank you. This week I attended the [Peninsula School District] Concert Band program [last Tuesday night in the sanctuary.] As a teacher and mom with 4 kids in the district... I have spent many an hour sitting on the Goodman bleachers listening to all manner of marches, ballads...you name it. This concert was the best by far. I think because the acoustics are so wonderful in the Sanctuary, but also because someone in our community reached out to those kids and showed them that their music matters and that they deserved to play in a beautiful venue. Others were grateful too for the comfort of the pews. A grandma sitting next to me commented that she hadn't heard her grandson play before because she couldn't sit without firm support and herefore couldn't do a folding chair or a bleacher. She was just tickled to be there and I saw her wipe a few tears from her eyes during the concert.

[Then the next night,] I dropped my boys off at Chapel Hill for turkey bowling. That was too much fun. They had a great, great time.

And tonight, I dropped them off for CHill. And it struck me as I walked through the door that this place is going to impact generations upon generations of people for the good. I never had that impression before when we went through the tour. Honestly, I just thought, "Wow, now Chapel Hill will be bigger than ever, and it is nice to have big beautiful buildings." But tonight, I was just struck by how MANY kids will be impacted by this program, by how many, many kids will make good choices based on what they learn by hanging out with their friends in God's house. What a great place to be. I thank you for having the vision to do this. It is sooo nice as a parent to know that your kids have somewhere safe (and cool) to go.

So, again, I just wanted to say thank you for opening the church to the children of our community. If Jesus is preparing a place for me in heaven, I hope that it is as neat a place as Chapel Hill."

Are these the monuments to YOUR God? Is this the God you serve? Is this the God you adore? Today is a day when those who call Chapel Hill "MY church" are going to pledge their financial support for the coming year. If this ISN'T your church... if you are visiting or still deciding whether this is home... you have absolutely no obligation to participate. We don't expect it. But if this is where you worship, if this is where you are learning

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truths and your kids are being helped, if this is where you have decided to grow, then this needs to be your church. And if you say, "This IS MY CHURCH," then today is the day you can put your money where your mouth is...and where your heart is. Because in every culture like Athens...and like ours... in every culture with beautiful temples and pleasure-seekers and apathetic people... in every culture that is swamped with idols of gold and silver... there are always a noble few. Dionysius. And Damaris. Those who go against the crowd. Those who stand up against the mockers. Those who say, "THIS is MY God. The God who is doing these things. The God who is changing these lives. THIS is the one whom I will worship. This is the one I will serve."

Your pledge is one way...an important way in our material culture... to say how important your God is to you. And how important your church is to you. So, what **does** your pledge declare? Will it declare, "This church is one of my many charitable causes; one of my many hobbies. I'll throw a few hundred dollars at it." Will it declare, "I may SAY this is my church...but I don't really believe it and I won't really support it." The 273 Chapel Hill families who did not give a dime to their church in the last year might be saying that. The 136 Chapel Hill families who gave less than \$1 a day to their church last year might be saying that.

Or will your pledge say, "This is MY church. This is MY God. This is MY mission. I am going to tithe. I am going to sacrifice. I am going to stretch myself to a level I have never reached before." If this REALLY is your church, it might mean that you have to tear up the pledge card that you brought this morning, already filled out. Same amount as last year. Same amount as the year before. And the year before that. Or it might even mean that you have to put that card back in your pocket and go home and wrestle with God and ask him why you get so angry about stewardship or why you are so stingy or why you think that others ought to provide everything that you take for granted... in YOUR church. Or best of all, it might mean that you will do it right now; you will fill out a new card with a faith-filled pledge because you realize that you can no longer say, "This is MY Church...This is MY God" and continue to give as you have given for all these years.

Last week, I got another note. Listen:

"Pastor Mark:

My friends said I should pass this on to you in this season of giving thanks, and in giving of our resources to God's work.

Our four-year-old son said his prayers, and we discussed things we can be thankful for. As we tucked him in, he thanked God for his family and for his cars (his prized possessions). Then, he said, "Mommy and Daddy, I want to give something back to God." We explained that he does give to God by pleasing Him every time he loves another

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person. He said, "That's great, but I think I want to give him something else, too." We asked what that might be. He responded, "I think I want to give God my Hot Wheels PT Cruiser. It's my favorite car." (Picture)

God is worthy of your best. God is worthy of your favorite. God's mission in this Church... YOUR church...is worthy of your faithful, sacrificial support. Nearly every one of your 27 elders and deacons and pastors has made leadership pledges. The average pledge of those officers is over \$12,000 per year. Cyndi and I have made our pledge for 12% of our income to OUR church. I hope you will join us.

SERMON QUESTIONS

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Spend a few minutes reflecting on the elements of today's service: Welcome to the Family, our soldiers, Swaziland update, the music and Pastor Mark's message. What do these elements indicate about the ministry of Chapel Hill?

Our children brought forward their coins to support their mission project. What does this teach them about money?
How do the lessons apply to us?

Pastor Mark talked about idols and the one, true God.
What things or interests have the potential to be too big
in your life, almost reaching "idol" status?
How do you manage to keep these in check?

Family activity:

Write to a child at New Life Homes in Swaziland telling them what a blessing they are and that you are praying for them. Then, pray together that God would bless them in their education and their lives.

Address (via airmail, delivery will take approximately 2-3 weeks)

New Life Homes
PO Box 2815
Mbabane H 100
Swaziland