

My friend told me he climbed into the pulpit, —  
preached what he thought was a well crafted sermon, —  
and in the preaching of it, noticed what was happening.  
The sermon, he said, sort of “*crawled over the edge of the pulpit  
and crashed into pieces on the floor before it reached the first pew.*”  
He could see that sermon dying as, while preaching, —  
he looked into the eyes of the congregation.  
*It was a dud!*

Some days that is the way it is.  
And Paul, after preaching this sermon in Athens which we just heard, —  
may have sensed what my friend sensed.  
The sermon was a dud.

Luke tells of other sermons in Acts.  
Peter — Peter at Pentecost there in Jerusalem.  
He preached a sermon.  
And so moved was the congregation  
that 3,000 people joined the church.  
Then in Peter’s very next sermon 5,000 people were converted.

But here Paul preaches.  
And some, — *frankly only two* are mentioned, — trusted what he said.  
*The others?* They scoffed.  
Or they said on their way out, —  
“*We may come back.*” “*We might listen to you again.*”  
“*Nice sermon, preacher!*” which of course means  
*it was a dud!*

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The intriguing thing is that these *Athenians had wanted to hear Paul.*  
*They* invited him to address them at the Areopagus —  
the place where matters of importance — debates about truth —  
took place.  
“You are bringing certain strange things to our attention.  
And we want to know about them, about what they might mean,”  
they were saying to him.

Their invitation was sincere.  
For the Athenians were learners.  
They were always exploring.  
They loved to debate, to discern new concepts.  
They were not threatened by the new.  
Their style was to incorporate into their own life  
insights from other cultures, philosophies, and religions.

For the ways of other religions and philosophies  
might well serve them in their pursuit of shaping and enhancing life.  
That is why their city had become so full of shrines to all sorts of gods.  
So as Paul, troubled by all the shrines he found around the city, —  
went about talking about this Jesus and resurrection  
these Athenians, far from rejecting him, were very open to him.  
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It is what preachers hope for — *an attentive congregation*.  
And as Paul began his remarks, he connected with his listeners.  
He lifted up what he had observed in their own city: —  
*their religiosity*.  
He had seen their religious seeking reflected in their many shrines, —  
even their shrine to “an unknown god.”  
Doubtless, it was an observation his listeners liked.  
For their religiosity portrayed  
*how intent they were on making life the best it could be*  
for them and for their city.  
Not only did the Athenians sustain shrines to all sorts of gods  
where sacrifices could be offered to *secure blessings* for their city.  
They even covered their bases  
by having that shrine to “an unknown god”.  
As one person noted, perhaps they thought that  
if somehow the gods of those other shrines failed them, —  
then a god they did not yet know  
would come through for them if they honored that god as well.<sup>1</sup>  
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Pursuing the divine to secure blessings for our way of life — — — .  
Sonny Perdue, the Governor of Georgia.  
Remember his actions last summer?  
If Paul had called him extremely religious, —  
*Governor Perdue would have been very pleased*.  
For Governor Perdue faced a challenge: — drought all across Georgia.  
And Georgia, especially metro Atlanta, —  
which the state and county governments  
had allowed to develop  
with little attention to the effect on water tables, —  
was not prepared for drought.  
So to *secure life*, the life Georgia had chosen to live, —  
Governor Perdue jumped into action.  
He put all sorts of pressure on the Corps of Engineers to divert water  
from Tennessee, Alabama and Florida for use in Georgia, —

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Williams, *Idol Behavior*, *The Christian Century*, April 19, 2005, p. 19

even though drought stretched across those states as well.

He put in place temporary water use restrictions.

And finally, he called for an *interfaith prayer rally*  
to pray up rainstorms over Georgia.

Governor Perdue is a Baptist.

But he called on people of all faiths — from any and every shrine —  
to join him on the steps of the state capitol  
*to cause*, by their religious activity, *blessing* to fall on their life.

Engaging in religious activity to gain intervention to serve our life — — — .

It is reflected not only in the actions of Governor Perdue.

It is reflected in that bumper sticker quip: —

*God is coming — — Look busy!*

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Hooking his listeners with his reference to their shrine to “an unknown god”, —  
*Paul makes his move* in his sermon.

Employing the best of Greek rhetorical style

he makes the point that that unknown god is in fact the one and only God.

He goes on to declare this one and only God

has made the whole world and everything in it; —

has made every person; —

has given to all life, breath, *the all* — everything that makes for life.

Paul even quotes the Athenians’ own poets

to lift up this notion that God is one.

This one God not only gives all life

but this God remains *lord* — *ruler over* all life.

And then Paul is bold enough to assert that this one God

is the one who calls on all people

*to repent* — *change their way of thinking*.

For this God has appointed a man to come to judge —

to determine if the inhabitants of the world

are in right relationship with this God — *the source of life*.

And finally, Paul declares

the assurance that this God is the only giver and lord over life

is that this God has raised this coming judge, Jesus, from the dead.

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Now, mind you, Paul’s listeners were *not monotheists*.

They reveled in their openness to all sorts of gods.

Yet even as Paul proclaimed that God is one

his listeners *stayed right with him*.

Not even his call for them to change their way of thinking

or his declaration that this one God will judge the earth *troubled them*.

Luke tells us it was *only* when Paul mentioned *resurrection*, —  
the raising of Jesus from the dead, —  
that he *lost his listeners*.

That is when their eyes glassed over and Paul's sermon crashed.  
Resurrection was *more than they could take*.

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Maybe that was so because resurrection was incredible.

For who could escape the power of death?

If one person could, then the possibility was opened for others.

And human life as they knew it did not allow room for that to be true.

But beyond this incredulity *lies something deeper*.

For, as one scholar puts it, "to affirm that God raised Jesus from the dead  
is to *acknowledge once and for all*

*that life itself belongs to God. . . .*

For the Athenians, as for the remainder of humankind, —

acknowledging the resurrection of Jesus Christ

means acknowledging that God made us, —

sustains us

*and stands beyond that fragment of life*

*we think of as ours.*

[It means acknowledging] our lives are never our own."<sup>2</sup>

And *there is the rub*, isn't it, — for the Athenians and perhaps for us.

For how we cling to the illusion that *life is ours*.

We go to the doctor with a troubling condition.

We undergo the tests, receive the diagnosis.

We get second opinions. We endure treatments.

We go back for tests and to have the history of our case reviewed.

And when all the treatments are exhausted, —

the doctor finally looks us in the eye and says, —

"We have done everything we know to do. *It's not in our hands anymore.*"

And we are stunned!

But then, *was it ever in our hands?*

The witness of biblical faith, —

the witness Paul offered at the Areopagus, —

the witness confirmed and assured

by God's raising up of Jesus the Christ

is that *life has never been nor will ever be in our hands*.

Life instead is always only in the hands of God.

Only God gives it. Only God sustains it.

Only God rules over it. Only God redeems it.

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<sup>2</sup> Beverly R. Gaventa, *Life Comes from God*, *The Christian Century*, April 28, 1993, p. 451

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“I see how extremely religious you are,” —

Paul had begun as he preached to the Athenians.  
Indeed they were. They prayed. They sacrificed.

They welcomed all sorts of religious expressions into their way of life  
as a way to manipulate the gods to gain blessings for their life.

Yet, *what they could not tolerate*, our scholar friend reminds us, —

“was that the *gods were not fundamentally theirs to control.*”<sup>3</sup>

They engaged in religious activity to serve *their* purposes, —  
to form and sustain *their life* as they yearned *their life* to be.

And they could not tolerate the thought  
that their life had never been, nor would ever be, —  
in their control.

And what about us?

Yes, we worship on Sunday because it is the first day of the week  
recalling the day God raised Jesus up out of death.

Yes, we declare we believe in the resurrection of the dead.

But even as we do so, —

*do we consider that resurrection is ours to gain*

by our virtue, by our faith, —

by our discipline and sacrifice, —

by our faithfulness?

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How hard it is to hear and accept

that life is *never* ours, it never has been, it never will be, —

but that it remains *only and always a gift from God.*

How hard it is.

So when Paul confronts us with this word, —

do we too scoff, or tune out and go on our way?

Yet Paul’s word, though it was a dud in Athens, —

and may often be received that way by us, —

*is it not good news?*

For is it not good, assured by God’s raising of Jesus from the dead, —

that beyond this fragment of life

that we have fooled ourselves into believing belongs to us, —

*there is God* — there is always the one God the giver of life?

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“Change your whole way of thinking,” Paul invites the Athenians — and us.

Give up on using God, seeking to manipulate God to serve your life

<sup>3</sup> Gaventa, p. 251

which has never ever been yours in the first place.  
That is a useless enterprise.  
Instead, live thankfully in utter trust of God alone, —  
the sole giver of life, —  
the only lord of life, —  
who beyond any fleeting fragment of life we now see or experience, —  
continues to give life beyond our imagining.

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Pete Peery  
First Presbyterian Church — Asheville  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
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