



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 14 May 2023
 “Cloud of Unknowing”
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Acts 17:22-31

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. **23** For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. **24** The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. **26** From one ancestorⁱ he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, **27** so that they would search for Godⁱ and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. **28** For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we too are his offspring.’

29 Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. **30** While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,

now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Are there any UNC Chapel Hill fans here familiar with the term ‘pit preacher’? Do other schools have pit preachers? I’m sure, if the term ‘pit preacher’ is unique to UNC, a similar phenomenon exists at schools around the country, especially godless public schools such as my alma mater.

As you can see here, and as many of you probably already know, the pit is a gathering space on campus right beside the student union and one of the main dining halls. There are brick steps leading down to the pit on all four sides, making it this rectangular crevasse in the middle of campus, overlooked by giant, beautiful old oak trees.

If you are wondering, yes, it does flood often.

When I was a student there, pit preachers would appear in the pit, usually early in the morning, or late in the afternoon as we were coming or going to class. They would yell and spew a hate-filled cascade of insults to students, telling us that we were all going to hell unless we repented and followed their extreme, exclusive, wildly-Biblically-inaccurate version of Christianity.

I laughed when I found this picture via Google this week. This is a picture of a good friend of mine whom I am still in contact with. That is Zaven Keusseyan, who rowed with me on the UNC crew team back in the early 2000s, right in the middle with his arms crossed, a look of disgust on his face as he squares off alongside several others before the pit preacher.

Unfortunately, we used to do just that. Students would approach the pit preachers and argue with them. I, unfortunately, used to do just that. As a young, aspiring minister, I would go up to them sometimes and argue and say that they had the Bible and God and sin and grace all wrong. Well, sometimes I would argue. Other times I would just walk past and yell, “These preachers are all jerks,” except, I was an impulsive college student back then, so of course, I used a different word than “jerks.”

What should I have said to them? Of course, not saying anything at all is probably the best idea. Have you ever heard the saying, ‘Don’t feed a troll’? As in, don’t give attention to attention-seekers acting in bad faith.

Should I have started, as Paul did in Athens, by saying “I see how extremely religious you are in every way”? Paul, of course, felt a similar discomfort, you could even call it disgust, with his audience. Acts 17:16 reports that Paul, steeped in the Scriptures of Jewish monotheism, “was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols,” when he arrived in Athens. But he tried to meet his audience halfway, praising their devotion. I question if that approach would have worked with the pit preachers. Paul, after all, believed the Athenians would, at least, give him a fair hearing without condemning him to hell.

Often, as you see here, the preachers brought along props – these huge signs telling us everyone they figured was going to hell. I won’t read the list because it is mean and offensive, filled with euphemisms barely masking hate speech.

So, perhaps a better line to use from Paul might have been v. 24:

The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines made by human hands.

or v. 27: *We ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.*

For this is exactly what the signs of the pit preachers represent: idolatry. And it's not just their hand-held signs that shrink God down into an instrument of domination and hate – Where do you even get a sign like that made, anyway? I always wondered that – It's the religion itself that is idolatry; it's Christianity itself, when used to denigrate and harass and abuse other people.

Black Liberation theologian Willie James Jennings says that, “The idol is a collective self-deception...where human fantasy and wish, circulating around material realities, generate distorted hope. The idol facilitates a hope of control of both my life and the life of the gods, that is, to draw the gods into common cause with me for sustaining my life.”¹ Is there any better example of an idol, than Christianity when it is used to distort divinity into a means of control, casting God in one's own hate-filled image?

The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines made by human hands, says Paul.

Even if the idolatry of pit preachers may feel far removed from our own lives, the human tendency toward idolatry still shows up, in me, and in you, and in our communities:

- Sometimes its gold and silver themselves, the hoarding of resources, because in a culture of scarcity we are told that accumulation will give us control over this unpredictable life.
- Sometimes its just plain politics; we mistake the Democrats or the Republicans, or certain of their leaders, to be our saviors, as if they would save us in a country where every day the gulf between the haves and the have nots grows wider and more entrenched.
- Sometimes its career or our job that becomes the center of our existence
- Sometimes it's as simple as a bias – at least I'm not like those people over there

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 177.

- And other times it's resentment itself, or its anger, or a woundedness, that we can't let go of until it has come to define who we are
- And quite often it is fear itself, fear of what is to come in an uncertain life. Fear that we let stop us from taking action and calling for change, when change is called for.

Idolatry is anything that we put in place of God. Anything that we give ultimate importance to. Anything outside of divine love that we hope will define us, or save us, and give our lives meaning and control. In a fearful and uncertain and mortal life, the tendency toward idolatry is understandable, but it does not lead to life and life abundant. Rather, when something other than divine love becomes ultimate in our lives, our idols become dangerous.

They lead us to condemn other people, or ourselves. They lead us to fear, or, like the pit preacher's religion, they teach us hate; rather than divine love pulling us together, idols separate us from each other.

We've already said this in sermons lately, but every week we are reminded that guns have become an idol in this country, when the right to bear arms is more important in the halls of power than the right of children to go to school without fear.

On this Mother's Day, when we give thanks for the mothering figures in our lives, we also must remember that only certain ideals or idols of motherhood have been valued in this country, to the exclusion of others pushed to the margins. Many different ways of being a mother or a mother figure in this country have gone unrecognized; and even having a child, for many, is becoming more dangerous with reproductive healthcare becoming more and more restrictive.

Black women in America are 3-4 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women, no matter how rich and well educated they are. In fact, it is Black women with PhDs who are at the highest risk of maternal complications in this country, because

they are not heard or believed in the American Health Care system. The idolatry of racism; this idol that teaches us to sort people, to raise some up to an impossible ideal and to denigrate others; this idol is deadly.²

Superiority and supremacy of any kind are idols. Domination of any kind is an idol. Anything that props up some to the exclusion of others. Anything that makes *you* feel like you are not worthy of the love and grace of the God who created you and your neighbor, is an idol.

In Acts, Paul contrasts idolatry with the divine love of a creative and creating God: “From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth ...[and] indeed the Lord is not far from each one of us.”

In other words, divine love brings us together, in contrast to our idolatries that are tearing us apart. Divine love lays claim on everyone as a child of God with the God-given right to life, love, and dignity.

So let us lay down our idols.

Let us remember that, *The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines made by human hands...* indeed the Lord is not far from each one of us.

Let us move ever closer to that divine love that binds us, to ourselves, to one another, and to God.

Let us lay down our idols, and as we do, let us say, thanks be to God.

² I learned this information from a video lecture shared by The Rev. Tami Forte Logan during the Faith4Justice meeting on May 11, 2023. See Othering and Belonging Institute, “Deirdre Cooper Owens on “Medical Bondage: Race, Gender and the Origins of American Gynecology.” YouTube Video. https://youtu.be/R_HvBT2IrA