"It's All Greek to Me"

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Acts 17:22-34

[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 ancestor 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 God 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."

[32]When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." [33]At that point Paul left them. [34]But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

When I was in high school, we studied Shakespeare's works, including his famous *Julius Caesar*. Written in 1599, this play was one of his great tragedies, a study of political scheming, the hunger for power, and the costs of hubris.

Did you study this play when you were a student? Even if not, I'm sure you know some of its catch phrases, like "beware the Ides of March" and "Et tu, Brute?" But did you know that another phrase which has come down to us over the years as part of colloquial English may have first appeared in this drama? When Casca told Cassius that Cicero spoke Greek, he added, "Those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads, but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me." In short, Casca had no idea what Cicero was saying.

Now, if you've studied history, or Latin, you may remember that Cicero was one of the great orators and most successful advocates of his day, and one of his innovations in trying cases was to abandon the florid way of speaking then prevalent in favor of one that was simpler, though still elegant. So, the idea that he would speak incomprehensible nonsense was amusing.

There is speculation that this wry way of saying someone was completely incomprehensible may be traced back to the Middle Ages. Supposedly, when monks found passages that they were trying to translate indecipherable, they would make notations on their manuscripts that the text was, literally, "Greek to me."

Frankly, we don't know the original provenance of this saying. What we can say is that for at least a half-millennium, "It's all Greek to me" has been a colloquial way of saying in English, "I have no idea what is being said."

One of the pitfalls that we preachers can fall into is using insider language that means nothing to our congregations or the wider world. We might want to show off our learning, but in truth all we do is show a lack of respect for our parishioners if we don't make everything intelligible to those who give us the benefit of their attention. It's a sure sign of failure if the response to a sermon is, "It's all Greek to me."

Consider today's lesson from Acts, which has a lot to say, but offers its share of pitfalls. For starters, do you know what or where the Areopagus is? It is located northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, and its name means "Hill of Ares." Thanks to the Romans, it's also known as the Hill of Mars. Does this mean anything to you, or is it still Greek to you?

Long before Athens' Golden Age of Democracy, a group of aristocrats were formed into a council, which met on the Areopagus. The group took on the name of its meeting place. Over time, its membership changed from hereditary aristocrats to the wealthy, and the council's prominence faded with time and the rise of other actors in the Athenian *polis*. Still, over the centuries, the Areopagus retained various judicial functions, some that changed and others that endured. By the time the Romans showed up and took over in the second century B.C., this council had a long history—one which might have been famous throughout the ancient Hellenistic world in which Paul did his apostolic work, and in which the Evangelist wrote his two-book tract of Luke-Acts.

Then again, it might not have been so famous. But the reference gives some local color to the story and, with the other details, offers a heightened verisimilitude to the action. Everyone knew that Athens was a center of learning and had long been home to philosophers and their competing schools. By the time of Jesus, Athens already had enjoyed this reputation for centuries.

Imagine Athens as a college town. It wasn't the center of the universe as it once was. In fact, it was something of a backwater, but one with a lot of history and prestige to its name. The locals took pride in learning and debating and thinking about the meaning of life. So when Paul wanted to make his case to them, he spoke in a way they would understand.

Now, I can't tell you why Paul spoke at the Areopagus; some have speculated that he was on trial, others that it was just a busy, go-to destination, and that he chose to speak where the action was. What we do know is that the Apostle arrived in Athens after visits to Berea and Thessalonika, where he had stirred up opposition from the locals, both Greek and Jew. Still, he was not to be deterred. Paul was man on a mission: he had the story of Jesus to tell, and that was that.

I think it's more than interesting that Paul, the opinionated hothead we've come to know, shows a keen sensitivity to the locals, wanting to make his argument in a way that they would appreciate. So, he draws them in, and in verse 28 we see him quote from two Greeks, Epimenides and Aratus. He doesn't need to cite the actual authors, just use their words, which Paul's audience would recognize.

It's as if I were to say, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free." I suspect you would recognize that those words were penned by Emma Lazarus; I would not have to tell you that these stirring words are from the poem known as "The New Colossus," which can be found on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Just a few words, and the hearer is most likely able to complete the picture. That is what Paul was doing, showing the locals that he knew Greek culture, that he was someone worth listening to.

Remember that the Jews and the Greeks, though different peoples with their own distinct histories, cultures, and religions, shared in common an ancient lineage. Both Jews and Greeks had proud, rich civilizations; both enjoyed a rich intellectual life, both saw themselves as apart from other nations—and both had suffered the ignominy of being conquered by the upstart Romans, who may have admired these two older societies but never doubted their own right to rule.

Paul knew his audience. He sought to draw them in, by the strength of his argument, by his reference to Greek philosophy, and by his noting the altar to an unknown god. We read just before today's lesson that the Apostle recoiled from all of the idols he saw, but what did he expect to find in Greece, the home to a rich mythology with a pantheon of gods? Was it so surprising that a society that had a divine being for just about everything would hedge its bets and offer sacrifices to a deity "just in case"?

I think not.

But Paul shared the Jewish aversion to false gods. Remember how Isaiah mocked the Babylonians for worshipping idols? Paul shared that sentiment—but here he doesn't give voice to his derision. Instead, he tries to use it to move people to his way of thinking.

I'm reminded of Pascal's Wager. Pascal was the Frenchman who said that if one was not sure whether there was a God, it made sense to act as if there was one—just in case. If God existed, then one would be set for eternity, and if he did not, well then, nothing lost. That's what the Athenians might have been doing. But Paul wanted to move them further along, to the view of a world in which the one true God reigned in justice, not one in which a panoply of deities did their own thing for their own benefit and needed to be bribed just to cover one's bases.

Paul acknowledges their search for truth, for something that was greater than themselves; he does not dismiss their longing. But it is important to note that he does not validate their erroneous beliefs, either. He finally takes aim at idols of gold and silver, of fancy temples, both of which filled Athens. He channels Isaiah and the old prophets of Israel. But rather than say the obvious, that the Greeks were wasting their time, he encourages them to look elsewhere.

And then he breaks the big news: the messenger that God has sent is a man who had been resurrected. To the Greeks this would have been outrageous. In their cosmology, this was simply not possible, plain and simple. Paul, however, argues otherwise. He never mentions Jesus by name here, but it is clear that the focus of all his preaching is once again at the center of his arguments.

Some scoffed, but some wanted to hear him out, and of those, some, including Damaris and Dionysius the Areopagite, accepted Jesus and became his followers.

Paul here knew that sometimes a full-frontal assault was not the best way to woo friends and win converts. He knew how disputation was done in Athens, and so he adopted the local methods. Draw them in with logic, prepare the field with facts and arguments, and then, and only then, put forward one's case.

Paul knew he was an outsider, that some saw him as a troublemaker. So, he adjusted his approach. But he never shied away from telling the truth about Jesus Christ.

He knew that he might win some people over, that he might pique the curiosity of others, and that he would fail to convince the rest. But he did not stop evangelizing. And these are lessons we cannot ignore.

When Paul arrived in Athens, he found a people whose religious fervor had waned. While many still followed the old patterns of religion, the conviction that fired their ancestors had ebbed. Yet the desire for more was still present. Paul knew that he had what they were seeking—not all would believe him, but some would.

We are Paul's heirs. We are called to be evangelists, to share the Good News. That's not a mission most mainline Protestants embrace, but think of those old words of Scripture: we should not hide our light beneath a bushel. In these weeks leading up to Pentecost, as we remember the stories of the early church, of the women and men who risked all for Christ, perhaps we might find some inspiration.

We live in a time of intellectual and spiritual uncertainty, much like those ancient Athenians. And like them, we live in a society that is constantly seeking answers. Sometimes the search of our contemporaries leads them down the paths of fringe spiritual movements, or a complete reliance on science, or some other ism that holds appeal. Maybe they seek comfort in one of the other great religious traditions, but still find themselves needing something more. And then there are those who find themselves drawn to the Christian message, but let us be honest: we know that comes in many different varieties.

We are blessed to live in a non-creedal part of the Christian vineyard, a corner that welcomes questions, that is open to inquiry, that prizes service to others. In this, the 400th anniversary year of Congregationalism in North America, we have a rich, living tradition to share with others.

Last week I mentioned that one of the benefits of studying at Harvard Divinity School was that I had to learn to positively articulate my faith, rather than denigrate someone else's. I can do so using imagery and cultural references that open the discussion wide and hopefully draw others to Jesus. One of the reasons so many ministers use references to the movies is that they want to be able to connect with the wider culture. As we try to stay relevant, I wonder if we need to move to YouTube references, and always make sure that we are not excluding people from the conversation. Otherwise, our audiences may well think we are speaking Greek to them—and misunderstanding or, worse, *not* understanding, is the last thing that Paul would want from us, his students and co-workers in sharing the faith.