

Back when I was writing for a newspaper in Upstate New York, I was asked to cover a very contentious town hall meeting. The meeting was about whether the region's three-county landfill facility, and whether or not it should start accepting trash from outside that region. The landfill was controversial, as all landfills are, when it was created, and the local residents again had some legitimate concerns.

At the time, the landfill managers said it needed the additional revenue to balance its books, but locals were concerned because taking more trash from areas outside of the region, might end up filling the landfill too fast, making it necessary to expand this one, or even worse, end up fighting again over where to put in a brand-new trash dump. Ultimately, county lawmakers did not grant the request at that time, because the people had swayed them with their concerns.

There were many sound arguments that I included in my article, but the one I remember most was one I didn't put in the article because it was completely bizarre. A local man opposed to the plan, got up holding an article I'd written and published a day or so before. In the article, I had written about the county's plan to repave a nearby road. This was a road I had traveled often and boy, did it ever need a paving. It ran between a few farms and had some dangerous potholes on it, yet the county kept putting off repairs for a lack of funds. My article was about how they finally had the money, and plans were underway to fix the road.

The man held up my article and accused the county of having already made its decision, because to him, the only possible reason to pave that one road would be to bring in new trucks. Never mind that the road ran in the wrong direction for these new trucks, or that it was narrow, and again, had quite a few significant potholes.

He said I wrote the article because the county wanted to cover its tracks ahead of the meeting. He didn't know me and must have thought my article was based on a press release. He didn't know I'd written the story *because* I drove that road every Wednesday, and I was sick of dodging potholes on my way to bible study. I wrote the story because I was asking when this road was finally going to get fixed and when they told me it was, I was happy and excited to write the story.

The man who spoke that night, I'm sure, was a good man and well intentioned. I suspect he was intelligent, because, after, all he was reading *my* newspaper articles. I kid, but truly, he was a smart man who owned his own successful business. But in this particular scenario, he let his emotions take over. He found a coincidence that made sense to him, and he ran with it. We see this in today's scripture reading from Acts.

Luke tells us the people of Athens were known for listening to new ideas from foreigners, but something about the Apostle Paul must have hit a nerve with them. He was challenging their whole outlook on life and the way they worshiped. And so, these normally intelligent citizens became agitated. They seized Paul, whom some dismissed as a babblers, a gossip, and whom others accused of promoting foreign gods, and they brought him before the Areopagus, a court in ancient Athens.

Paul was not taken to the Areopagus because he had been invited to a philosopher's club, where they wanted to hear all the details of his latest philosophical arguments. No, Paul has been taken to the Areopagus for some kind of formal hearing. Now, it's unclear if this means that Paul was actually facing charges, as it is more likely, he was just being preliminarily examined, perhaps to see if there was a reason to bring formal charges. What we read was likely the brief summary, of perhaps hours of dialogue that day.

In today's world there are a lot of things we can learn from this scripture we just read. As we saw with the man that I told you about in Upstate New York, like the Athenians, even smart people can see coincidences and jump on them, especially when we think they support things we are emotionally vested in.

In the case of Paul, first they accuse him of not being as smart as he seems. That term we translate as babblers or gossip, is literally a word that means 'seed picker,' as in someone who picks up a little tiny bits of truth and re-plants them. The irony that I do not think is lost on Luke, the author of Acts, is that Paul essentially accuses the entire Areopagus of the same. But he doesn't do it by calling them names or accusing them. He does it by applauding them, because he holds up that the seeds they have collected are in fact part of a bigger picture truth, but the way in which they planted them, produced counterfeit gods, and Paul now offered them the One True God.

So, when Paul was going around the city, stopping at every idol to discuss it with the locals, he was using those moments as an opportunity to discuss Jesus and the resurrection. But perhaps because the people were so resistant to his criticisms of idolatry, some of them totally miss what Paul is talking about it seems, and they accuse him of promoting two new gods – Jesus and Anastasis (or Anastasia).

Resurrection was a concept that Greek and Roman culture rejected. In fact, it was written that the god Apollo had said at the Areopagus when it was founded, *That once a person dies and the earth drinks up their blood, then there is no resurrection* or, in Greek, *anastasis*. So, when they hear Jesus and the Resurrection, they assumed Anastasis was Jesus' wife, like Iris and Osiris in Egyptian myths.

This is what sets the stage for Paul – he knows what he has been accused of doing – and when he enters the Areopagus, he is not a seed picker, but a man who is prepared. You see, Paul grew up in Tarsus, which like Athens, was a center of philosophy. Think of Tarsus as Cornell compared to Princeton being Athens in an ancient Greek Ivy League. And then Paul had also studied under Gamaliel, the top Pharisee Rabbi. So, think of Paul as having degrees from Cornell and another from Oxford, getting ready to defend himself and possibly his life, against the best and brightest from Princeton, or whichever you consider the top Ivy League school. Paul is not a seed picker, or babblers, but he is himself the best of the best, with the added confidence, that God was with him.

And what's more, I think Paul has a sympathy for these Athenians, because he likely remembers how even he was blinded by his emotions at one time, when a group of fishermen and even a tax collector challenged his beliefs, telling Saul, as he was known to Aramaic speakers, about Jesus, whom they said was the One True God of Israel, YHWH, come down to earth to share in our humanity, as the Messiah. And as Messiah, he lived like us, and even died on a cross for us, only to

rise again and send the Holy Spirit, to live within those who call Him Lord and follow his command to love one another as He had loved them.

For Paul, what didn't make sense to him before was not the resurrection, because as an observant believer in the Hebrew scriptures there was hope for a physical resurrection at the end of time. No, his hang up was the idea of the cross, as it had been written in Deuteronomy that anyone hanged on tree was cursed. So, without listening to them, he dismissed Jesus's followers & persecuted them, even aiding and abetting the murder of Stephen as we read last week. Paul was so emotionally charged he wanted to kill his opponents, but at least the Athenians were now giving him a fair hearing.

With this background, we see the artistry of Paul's speech to the Areopagus, his defense. Paul is not just making concessions to the counterfeit view of the pagan religions, but he is actually choosing to not act as he had toward the Christians before him. He is not dismissing everything they say because he doesn't agree with them. Instead he is interpreting what they had to say favorably to understand where God has been moving among them.

What Paul is doing is respecting the coincidences here, but rather than just accepting their counterfeit conclusions, he is revealing for them the big picture. This matters to us now, because it's not as though Stoicism and Epicureanism have gone away. These two philosophies continue to dominate modern intellectual circles, where we think ideas like agnosticism – there may be a God but it doesn't matter – or deism – that there is a God, but that God isn't concerned with me, I only have to be a good person in order to get the most of life – are actually new ideas that come from smarter modern minds.

In truth, both Stoicism and Epicureanism espoused these very ideas, with each one centered on the idea that life's purpose is our own personal pursuit of happiness. The Epicureans said this was done through pleasure, friends, and learning. The Stoics said it was done by knowing your duty in society, and then becoming self-sufficient to pick yourself up by your bootstraps by doing what is right. In both, the gods were secondary to personal happiness.

For the Epicureans divinities were respected, but they were unknowable, and for Stoics, the gods were novelties, because in truth everything is divine.

Paul starts out his speech by finding common ground with the Epicureans, and he uses the altar to an unknown or unknowable god. Practically speaking, this was likely a catch all for the religiously observant, who felt it best not to upset any god or goddess, even unknown ones. But to the Epicureans, who believe the gods are distant and unknowable, Paul says this unknown God is known to him as the one God who created all things. He says this true God doesn't live in shrines made by human hands, and yes, he tells the Epicureans that they are indeed right to say this God doesn't need to be appeased with their gifts, but, this God *has* engaged in human affairs throughout history, and has done so to lead people to search for him, because God is not distant, but very close to us. Paul points out that we are called to respond to God, who wants to know us personally.

And to the Stoics, who believe the gods help us understand the divinity in everything, Paul quotes the stoic poet Aratus's poem, *Phanomena*, which says of Zeus the high god, 'In him we live and move and have our being, for we too are his offspring.' Paul says that our being is not in the high god of

many, but the True God, and if we are God's offspring, objects should not be our siblings. We ought not to think that the divine can be made of gold, or silver, or stone, or found in any form of art, or any concept of human imagination. God is the Creator, present to all things, and present in us by the Holy Spirit, but not everything is divine.

Paul then plays to the ego of the Athenians who do not want to be perceived as ignorant. He says that God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, and now God commands all people everywhere to turn to Him, to repent, because God has fixed a day on which the world will be judged, not for the eventual destruction of all things as Epicureans taught, or the collapse and rebirth of all things as the Stoics taught to happen exactly the same again.

Rather, Paul preaches that God has fixed a day to judge the whole world, and it will be Jesus who is the judge. He shares in the identity of God, and we can be assured of his righteousness, because He was resurrected, because God would not do something so incredible to just anyone.

This my friends, is a mic drop moment for Paul, where he has come full circle in closing. You see he was brought before this panel for being misheard about Jesus and Anastasia, but now they have actually listened to him and know he is talking of resurrection. Some of them scoff at him, but others have a desire to hear more. Paul has soothed some anxiety and touched a new nerve as well.

Friends, in this time of isolation, many are groping for God and searching for meaning, searching for something to help them understand what is going on around them. Like that man I told you about at the public hearing about the landfill, it is easy for smart people to get caught up by coincidences, and let our emotions drive us to lose sight of the big picture. All of us are looking for something real right now, and we think that it will be found in our building when we get to come back, or found by having someone to blame for all of this death and devastation.

Our building will indeed be a comfort to us all when we can gather together again in it, and surely, there have been mistakes made along the way in handling this virus. But while these things are true in some respect, they are not the big picture. Following any one thing too far, even a good thing, leads us to what is fake, and ultimately, these counterfeits lead us away from our God.

We need to remember the big picture, and it is unchanged from what Paul preached, the God who created all things is with you now because God desires to be with you. No matter what you are going through, you are not alone, turn to Jesus, who has shared in your experience. You can trust in Him, our righteous judge, who knows us as our connection between God and our own humanity. Receive the Holy Spirit, to comfort and guide us. By your faith you are filled with the Spirit, to let God's love pour into and pour out of you to others. That is the big picture. Listen to others, see the truth around you and remember the only truth that matters is God's love. Amen.