

# The St. John's Pulpit

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## **RELIGIOUS, SCOFFERS, JOINERS, BELIEVERS, ORPHANS AND KEEPERS**

Acts 17:22-34 and Gospel of John 14:15-21

Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017  
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In the year, 399 BC, Socrates stood on an outcropping of marble northwest of The Acropolis. This outcropping of marble was called Mars Hill or The Areopagus. It was the place where the thirty members of the Athenian council heard presentations. Socrates, who was 70 years old by that time, was accused of teaching against the Athenian gods. For three hours, Socrates' accusers had the floor; He then had 3 hours to present his case. After these six hours of presentation, a jury of 500 Athenians made their decision. By a vote of 280 to 220, the 70 year old Socrates was found guilty. He was sentenced to voluntary homicide and given hemlock to drink.

Four hundred and fifty years later, in 51 AD, Paul stood in the same place. Paul was brought before The Areopagus council by Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. Paul was not so much on trial as much as he was as an outsider with new religious ideas.

Let me interject an epigram from a more recent century that is apropos here. In 1895, Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote, "*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*"

Consider with me the similar contexts of the first century and our twenty-first century. The Stoics emphasized rationalism and logic teaching alignment of life with the *logos*, meaning the natural laws of the cosmos. Today, Stoicism is known as cognitive-behavioral therapy. The Epicureans taught that it was okay to draw from diverse religious perspectives in order to live with as little stress as possible. The goal in life is pleasure through serenity. The Athenians understood themselves to be so unique that they emerged from the soil of Athens. That pride was evident in every aspect of Athenian living. In the first century, Athens was an extremely intellectual and pluralistic religious city. Paul notes their monuments to many gods including an altar for '*the Unknown God.*'

Today, numerous cultures propose their traditions are so unique that all others are inferior. In today's world, we have identified 4,200 different religions being observed. And, yet, as twenty centuries ago, millions still worship at the shrine of The Unknown God. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century, millions of persons follow religions based upon rationalization or pleasure. Even many followers of Jesus focus more on rationality and pleasure than on Jesus' teachings.

You understand what Paul was sensing on that day in Athens. He had persecuted and even overseen the killing of Christians such as Stephen. He wanted to explain how his life had been transformed by Jesus' teachings on The Living God. He wanted people to understand about Jesus' resurrection and his promise for perpetual life. Paul thought he could offer a new perspective that would bring them new life.

*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*

We witness of Jesus' resurrection every day; and we celebrate his resurrection each Sunday. And, like Paul, we see many religious people who are confused and unfulfilled in their journey. In a city full of shrines to gods, Paul proclaimed God is not made with hands; God is the Maker.

Recently, a person told me they follow a religion named, *A Course in Miracles*; a New Age religion which was channeled by a psychologist from Columbia University in New York City in the 1960s. I asked about the origin or the source from which or from whom the channeling occurred. The person was confused by my question and replied, "*She just came up with it; she channeled it.*" I explained, "*If she channeled the teachings, then she was merely the conduit, the channel. What or Whom does she name as the source of her message?*" Deeper confusion was evident on his face. So, I chose to leave that figurative Areopagus and end the conversation.

With 4,200 religions being observed in our day, we live a religiously confused and confusing era. But, this is nothing new. **JESUS HIMSELF EXPERIENCED SCOFFERS.**

When we bear the good news, the Gospel of God's hopeful message of salvation in a sinful world, we deal with scoffers. There will always be people who mock or jeer God's Gospel. Psalm 1:1 suggests, "*Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers.*"

The scoffers are only one of groups mentioned in our scripture readings today.

Some said to Paul, '*we want to hear more about this Jesus and the resurrection of the dead.*'

Some of the crowd joined him and some became believers.

One of the believers was Dionysius, a member of the 30 member Areopagus council.

Another believer was a woman named Damaris. They brought others with their influence.

Beloved, if you allow others to know how your relationship with God is meaningful and fulfilling for you, through your obedience of Jesus' teachings, you will influence others.

You are not following Jesus by yourself. You have one another as a community of faith.

Jesus taught, you also have God's Presence with you in the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate.

We are constantly being taught by the Holy Spirit of God; growth in discipleship is essential.

So, Jesus said, "*I will not leave you orphaned...*" meaning 'abandoned.'

Plato explained that after Socrates died, his disciples, "*thought they would have to spend the rest of their lives forlorn as children bereft of a father, and they did not know what to do about it.*"

Jesus told his disciples what they could do after his departure. Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*"

Yes, beloved, our age is full of religion. Some are scoffers; some are joiners; some are believers; and some are like spiritual orphans. But, not you; you are KEEPERS. You keep the commandments of Jesus. You study his teachings. You apply his practices to your living.

Someone recently asked me, '*Do you really believe in life after death?*' I was thankful for their trust. I responded with these words: '*Yes, I believe in the perpetual or eternal life Jesus taught. I do not believe in perpetual life because I understand it to explain it. I believe in perpetual life because I believe Jesus told the truth about God. And, like you, I am maturing in keeping his teachings. And the more I keep his teachings, the more I find his love keeps me.*' Amen and AMEN