

American Idol  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 66:16-20  
Reading from the New Testament: Acts 17:16-31

To be honest, I haven't watched *American Idol* since the days that Kelly Clarkson was waiting tables in Oklahoma. Paula, Randy, and the scowl of Cowell sitting behind the dais, offering encouragement, critique, and a dash of brutality as aspiring idols step to the mic sharing melodies, sometimes sour, sometimes sublime, always with the hope of a kind word of approval, and maybe a record contract, fame and fortune. Soon, the whole nation was buzzing at the coffee shop or bus stop, using phrases like, *It was a bit pitchy, wasn't it?* and *I just didn't feel ya, dawg*.

The whole *American Idol* enterprise, including such progeny as *The Voice* and *America's Got Talent*, is an intriguing mash-up of human aspiration, idol worship, and profoundly subjective valuation. Perhaps you remember *The Apple Tree*, Mike Nichols' trilogy of one-act playlets, "each based on someone who believes that they want something, but once they get what they wanted they realize that it wasn't what they wanted."

I would know what it meant, to be truly content.  
 If I could only be a movie star.  
 Prospects look dismal, how can I go on?  
 My piggy is empty, my Kleenex is gone.  
 If I starve here alone,  
 Let them carve on my stone.  
 She never got to be a movie star. (*The Apple Tree*, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnik)

In a way, *The Apple Tree*, *Idol*, and all the rest involve many of the same dynamics at work in Paul's encounter with the Areopagus, including human aspiration, idol worship, and the human predilection for profoundly subjective valuation. Of course, these dynamics are always at work wherever people live together, and in our text today, Paul addresses these dynamics in the context of a sovereign God.

As you drive the highways and backroads across America, every once in a while, you will come across a church with a name like Mars Hills United Methodist or Mars Hill Baptist or in the case of one of the early contemporary megachurches, simply Mars Hill. I'm embarrassed to say I didn't make the connection until studying our text this week. Mars is remembered as the Roman god of war, second only to Jupiter in the Roman Pantheon. Yet, most of the stories related to Mars were borrowed from the Greek god, Ares. In the Greek city of Athens, to the northwest of the Acropolis, lies a hill named for Ares, the Areopagus

(literally, the hill of Ares in Greek). And it was on this hill that the vestiges of a council of king's advisors met, adjudicating murder cases in its earlier days along with exercising authority over religion. It was before the Areopagus in 399 BC that Socrates was charged and convicted of Impiety against the Pantheon of Athens and Corruption of the youth of the city-state. The gatekeepers of religion concluded the new ideas and theological implications of Socrates had moved beyond what was acceptable and Socrates was rewarded with a free hemlock smoothie.

The shadow of the Socrates trial looms in the background of Luke's witness to Paul's encounter with the Areopagus, not so much the legal questions or consequences, but rather the debate over religious fundamentals amidst new ideas and alternate Godviews. By the time Paul appears before the Areopagus, it was just a vestige of its former self, perhaps at this point more comparable to a snooty book club of intellectuals debating ideas as opposed to a courtroom for the exercise of jurisprudence.

One would think Paul was a little out of breath by the time he arrived in Athens, having in succession been run out of three towns on

his way there. Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea. While several hearts were opened to the way of Christ along the journey, Paul's concert tour was not much of a hit with the critics. In fact, he was at loose ends and alone in Athens, having been dropped off there by the benevolent souls who had helped him escape from the last disastrous show in Beroea.

As I asked last week, what do you do when you arrive in a new city and have some time to kill? You walk around, explore the sights, and the sights of Athens included a profusion of idols. It was like that house that sits alongside 74 on the way to the beach that sells lawn statues. There's no way you can take it all in with one drive-by. It seemed like the Athenians had more deities than people.

Monotheism was certainly not au courant in Athens. So, was I Paul, having been chased out of a trifecta of townships already, I would've stayed on the down-low in Athens with a ball cap pulled low and sunglasses, at least until the arrival of some friendly backup. But, obviously, I'm no Paul, because Paul jumped right into the fray, debating publicly with the heirs of philosophers who had honed their skills of disputation over centuries. Though some just rolled their eyes, concluding that he was just yammering, Paul was holding his own,

enough so that he was brought to the Areopagus where Luke says the members of the all-star, snooty book club would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Well, we know enough about Paul to know that if you give the man a microphone, he's going to use it. "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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, 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."

Now, granted, our neighborhoods may not be overrun with lawn statuary, but that certainly does not mean that we have no idol issues. In fact, the idols in our neighborhoods would make the lawn statue store on 74 look like a pristine prairie. Our idols tend to come neither with divine provenance nor appellation, neither gargoyle features nor Confucian belly fat. Rather, our idols come with price tags and

insurance riders, zip codes and names to drop. Our idols may come in the form of trends, conspiracy theories, investment portfolios, political affinities, fitness obsessions, nutrition religions, self-help programs, remodeling must haves, Amazon deliveries. Toilet paper? Thermometers? Assault weapons?

We'll manage to make an idol out of about anything. How about the Bill of Rights? Did you see the protester in Raleigh wearing a rocket launcher in Subway? Just exercising his rights while waiting for his meatball sub. That was heartwarming. Didn't know you'd need mortar fire to defend against the tyranny of face masks. Even our children become the idols we venerate. "Oh, he's such a smart boy. I swear, he was reading chapter books in utero."

In Genesis, when Rachel marries Jacob and leaves her homeland of Haran to follow the promise of the God of Israel, she slips a couple of her father's idols into her saddlebag, you know, just in case. In similar fashion, when we rise to say the Apostle's Creed every one of us is probably carrying a couple of idols in our back pockets, you know, just in case. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty." Similarly, the Lord gave the Law to Moses and Israel. "I am the Lord your God, who

brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

This is not the edict of an egomaniacal deity. This is the wisdom of the Creator, understanding what is needed for the welfare of the created (That would be us.) To Israel, Moses said, "Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time."

His head still spinning from the crowded field of deities clamoring for Athenian hearts, Paul, trained in the Law, bathed in the redeeming love of Christ, addresses the Areopagus: "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. 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 ... From one ancestor he made all

nations to inhabit the whole earth ... 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. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'."

You know the siren call of the idols you are loathe to admit you hold in your back pocket, just as I know mine, While it is always easy to point out the idols of everyone else, the challenge, the path toward wholeness in life and relationship begins with confronting our own. What is it that obstructs your view of the one in whom we live and move and have our being? Sure, the usual candidates plague us: wealth, power, possessions. But it could be something as personal as a deep-seated need for constant affirmation and praise; or a need for confrontation, conflict, battle; or, maybe it is the need to be noticed, garner attention, fame, notoriety.

Hip hop artist NF offers the idol of his youth like this:

I could go to college, get in debt like everybody else  
 Graduate and probably get a job that doesn't pay the bills  
 That don't make a lot of sense to me, forget the Happy Meals  
 I don't like the dollar menu, I would rather make a mil'  
 Huh? Make a meal? Nah, I said make a mil'  
 Home-cookin', get the grill, how you want it? Pretty well?



Everything I see is overdone to me, I'm not Adele  
But I'ma get a record deal and say hello to mass appeal.

*(When I Grow Up, NF)*

As my friend Reyn said this week, "You can never get enough of what you don't really want." It's when you can honestly name your idols that you can begin to set them aside and focus on what you truly need.

What are the idols that distract you from the grace that is right in front of you; distract you from the relationships that are just waiting to be nurtured or reconciled; distract you from the strength available to you in times of trial and pandemic; distract you from the hopes that cannot be bought, coerced, or controlled, but can always be opened by love, that precious gift from the One in whom we live and move and have our being? Amen.