

Sermon “Not Just Another God”
Kirk of St James
Sunday May 10, 2026
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

There is something about this story in Acts that always captures the imagination. The details, how the story unfolds, and the drama all paint a fascinating picture. It also addresses one of the most important questions that I wrestle with constantly—how do we share the Good News in our world today? This account is a fantastic example of how we as Christians can engage in the world around us, because as different as our world is from Paul’s, he has left us an example that is timeless.

Before arriving in Athens Paul has experienced some difficulties. He has been run out town in both Thessalonica and Beroea. Arriving in Athens he is in new territory. Athens was a university town, and a great seat of learning in the ancient world. In many ways it was the heart of philosophical learning and was a place of great religious curiosity. The citizens of the city were described in Acts 17:21 as spending their time doing nothing more than telling or hearing something new. Paul is walking into the heart of the city with the deepest thinkers, and most inquiring of minds. What does he have to offer that they have not heard before? What can he say that will have any impact beyond a general sense of curiosity?

Instead of stepping up to speak right away Paul takes some time. He wanders around the city and takes note of what he sees. As one commentator wrote "The people of Athens loved learning, and this insatiable desire drove their waking hours. Especially in religion, they hungered for more and determined to leave no stone unturned. Upon entering the city, Paul noted the expanse of their religiosity, an expanse indicative of a much deeper existential

restlessness. He saw a city replete with idols, and he described the residents as "religious in every way." Idols were important in the ancient world they were used for worship, as a physical representation of different gods, they were thought to contain power, and people also paid homage to them. In Athens they even had an altar "to an unknown God." Scholars are not sure why they had an altar dedicated to an unknown God, although there are some suggestions. Some have suggested that perhaps they were superstitious, maybe they were just covering all their bases and did not want to offend a god they did not even know about. Or, perhaps in Athens they realized there may be much more to the world than they could ever know, and this altar recognized that reality. Whatever the reason for it, as Paul made his way around the city reading the inscriptions under the different gods on display, that one catches his attention. It will be his "in" with people, the hook he needs for his upcoming speech.

Could you imagine the response if Paul had stood up and said "Listen all you Athenians, if you were really so smart you would know that all of your gods are useless, and there really is only one. In fact, you are so superstitious and silly you even have to make an altar to all the gods you don't know!" But instead, Paul stands up and does something surprising, he stands up in the Areopagus, (an area of the city used for matters both of justice trials etc. and religious matters) and he affirms them in their search. "I see how extremely religious you are in every way." He acknowledges their longing, their search, and desire to know God and that is where he begins. He does not dismantle their beliefs but rather affirms their quest. Then he names the unknown God. Paul says, "I know this God, he is the one who made the world and the one who sustains it." Then he takes it a step further as he looks at some of their own teachings and refers to their poets. Paul is speaking their language.

What Paul did on Mars Hill that day as he addressed the Athenians raises some interesting questions for Christians. How do we as Christians interact with the secular world being one?

I have come up against this question of how much the secular and the sacred should be mixed numerous times? Chad and I were driving somewhere the other day, and the question came up again around film and music. For example, when planning for the Canada Youth conference several years ago the question came up can we show popular movie clips during our sermons on screen to help further the message or make a point? Are there books that are not explicitly Christian that can teach us more about how we think of God? The debate rages on about the secular, sacred divide.

One of the better explorations of this debate came from a theologian named H. Richard Niebuhr. He did a series of lectures in 1949, later compiled into a book called *Christ and Culture*. He calls the struggle between the secular and sacred "the enduring problem" and he put forth five ways to consider it. I have mentioned these before, but I would like to remind you briefly of three of them as they are an interesting way of looking at the question and most likely all of us fall into one of these categories. The first Niebuhr called Christ against culture. In other words, some Christians see everything that is in the world as evil or sinful and therefore is not compatible with their Christian beliefs. Earthly things can teach us nothing of Christ or God because they are earthly. The second one is Christ of culture, people who fall into this category see no tension between the church and the world and everything is compatible. It is almost the opposite of the first. The third one is Christ Transforming culture. This view is hopeful, the belief being that the Lord can transform all things by lifting them up to himself.

Looking at the example Paul set for us today he seems to fall into the third category, using their own language, their own images, and their own style of learning he seeks to engage them. Paul names the unnamed. Then he does something incredible. He looks around at all their gods, both named and unnamed and explained why Jesus could not just be lined up with the other Gods and simply become just another member of the pantheon, but rather he points to Jesus as the one in whom we live, and move, and have our being. He did not water down his message, he proclaimed it boldly, but in a way that was inviting.

Whatever category you find yourself in, however you view Christ and culture, may we all have a little bit of a Paul like spirit. May we respectfully and boldly engage with the world around us. One of the most famous quotes about evangelism and sharing the gospel was written by a man named D.T Niles, and he wrote "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." It is out of humility, love and understanding that we share with others. Sometimes when we look at our modern world it is difficult to think of it as being like Paul on Mars Hill that day. Yet, if we were to honestly look around us, we realize that although the gods look different, and the cities look different at our heart humans are still full of curiosity and questions. We are still surrounded by a pantheon of gods, all trying to lay claim to our lives, and the voice of Jesus still cuts through it all as clearly as it did back then. Just as the Athenians searched for the answers, we too live in a world that is full of questions, and longing. As Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself God, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." May we share with others in a language that is honest, respectful and truthful, and invites people to know God just as Paul did.