

Like virtually all of the nations surrounding the Mediterranean Sea on up into northern Europe, Athens was a vassal city in the Roman Empire. It had lost its Independence as the Greek Empire was replaced by Rome.

In Paul's day the City of Athens was not politically independent, but it retained its character as a lively city that enshrined Greek culture. The arts...and schools of philosophy, science, and politics flourished.

A Greek education was highly valued. Athens was the place to go to exchange ideas and philosophies and learn new things. Being the sort of cerebral nerd I am, I suspect I would have loved Athens.

It was also religiously very diverse. There were lots of gods...Greek gods and Roman gods...so many it would have been hard to keep them straight. The Athenians were quite tolerant of all religions. There were idols all over the place to this god or that god. This troubled Paul greatly.

Then there's the philosophers. Paul mentions the Epicureans and the Stoics – they appear to be the dominant philosophical schools at the time.

Epicureans believe that the chief aim of life was pleasure.

Sometimes accused of being too unrestrained about the seeking of pleasure, their basic belief was that virtue and living well were the best routes to a pleasing life...and that was the ultimate goal.

They believed there were gods, but for them the gods had little to do with humans – people were on their own.

The Stoics also believed virtue was the highest good. Stoicism was focused on aligning one's actions with reason and logic. Passions and extreme emotion were seen as impediments to the virtuous life.

The Stoics didn't really believe in a god at all – their guiding light if you will was the order and logic of the natural world.

Christianity borrowed ideas from the philosophers – John's depiction of Jesus as the word, or logos, comes from Stoicism.

And they're not dead. Videos about modern day Stoicism and Epicureanism still show up on my YouTube feed. To be honest, either one might still be a decent guide for life compared to the complete lack of a moral compass that we sometimes see.

There was also at least one synagogue in Athens and the Jewish folks seemed to live compatibly right alongside everyone else.

In some ways, Athens was not unlike many of the large cities in our own world. Diverse, full of energy, and characterized by people of lots of faiths...Jewish synagogues, mosques, Buddhist temples, churches, cathedrals, home altars...and also by people who claim no faith.

But Paul is in Athens to proclaim the one true God and what that God accomplished in Jesus Christ.

Paul is faced with the same dilemma Christians are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century...how do we talk what we believe to be the one true God in a world so diverse.

And where that dilemma really grows its horns is when we ask the question...is our God inclusive or exclusive? And what does a church look like when it answers inclusive...and what does a church look like when it answers exclusive?

Can Paul help us with that?

I think so but a couple of things to remember first. First, like Jesus, when Paul talked about life and salvation he's not primarily talking about what happens after we die. When we go there, we begin to think this is about who gets into heaven and who doesn't.

What happens to us after we die...our life after our earthly one...is God's deal not ours. We don't have a say. We have to live with the idea that God may very well gather the worst people we can think of into that eternal embrace.

For Jesus and the New Testament writers, salvation is more about entering a new life now...Paul will call it new creation. It's about being remade through trust in Christ. It's about living in a different operating system than the one the world offers.

With that, let's turn towards the issue of idols, because that's what triggers all this.

Paul's question to the Athenians, and really to us is which gods are real? Which god can truly offer life? Or new life? Which gods connect us to something eternal?

The Greeks mostly viewed the gods as beings who were either annoyed by people or just uninterested. Their worship and sacrifices to their idols were primarily meant to keep the gods happy so they could hopefully avoid misfortune. The idea that the gods might love them probably would have seemed ludicrous.

Paul doesn't condemn their idol worship. What he does instead is essentially compliment them. I see that you are very spiritual. I mean look at all these gods!

But one especially caught Paul's eye...an altar to an unknown god.

The Athenians probably wanted to make sure all their bases were covered. They didn't want to accidentally leave out a god who would then be angry.

But Paul said, I know who this is. This is the God I know.

This is not a god made by human hands. This is the author of all life. This God gave each of us life. This God is the one your poets wrote about – the one who lives in us...who continues to give us life...who is right here with us, bringing us into new life. This is the God who brought Jesus back from the dead.

Paul answers the question of which God can bring life. But there was no coercion. No condemnation. And some did believe. Many didn't, at least not yet. But Paul makes it clear that the God of life and salvation is available to all, no matter what gods they've previously worshipped. God is not exclusive in the sense of denying life to certain people.

This idea of a God who offers life is the one that can most help us. There are plenty of idols in our own world – wealth and power are perhaps leading contenders. They are the things we are tempted to count on to save us. But do they actually offer life? Perhaps in a limited way...without money it's hard to live.

But they don't offer that deep connection to the eternal...they don't offer that living water flowing in and through us.

But I actually think the most nefarious idol we have in our day and age is one that actually gets called Jesus Christ. This idol is the Jesus who says certain people are excluded from salvation and new life.

It's a Jesus of violence and conquest. It's a Jesus who seems to favor rich people over poor – when the gospels essentially say the opposite. It's a Jesus who excludes certain groups of people and views some people as better than others.

That idol isn't just foolish – it's dangerous.

We are called to proclaim something different.

There is a lot I don't know, but I believe that Jesus has made God known. And what we know is that Jesus did not exclude. He made it clear that real, eternal life is found in him,

but it was open to all. His ministry put the poor and the outcast...the people at the margins...in the center. Religious purity was not a requirement.

Maybe God's tent has always been bigger than we can imagine.

And the church's tent should be bigger than we imagine...bigger than we are comfortable with.

I'm reading a book by the late Rachel Held Evans. It's a book of blog posts she wrote before she died with commentary from friends and followers. In one, an essay about the church and LGBTQ people, she wrote that the church should be a place of safety and welcome for everyone, but not always a place of comfort for any of us. We should be challenged now and then.

I do believe that the God who created us is the one true God. That the God in Jesus Christ is the one who brings us into new life. And in the Holy Spirit, I believe this God lives in us and is the one in whom we live and move.

But I don't believe that makes God exclusive in the sense of excluding people whose beliefs and lives don't fit my understanding...our understanding. I think the expanse of God's love extends far beyond what we can imagine.

God does not lead Paul to condemn the Athenians for their idols. What God does lead Paul to is to share the message of life...new life...eternal life.

As the church, that's our call as well. And even when we're uncertain...even when we are uncomfortable with those who are different, we are called not to put up walls, but to make the tent bigger.