

# “Everyone’s a Theologian”

#1 in the *CREDO* series

Text: Acts 17:16-28

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, March 13, 2011

8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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Check any newspaper, magazine, electronic or hard copy versions, or check any television website, and you won’t find “Religion” as major header for their news items. But yet....

The bad news of the non-religious news seems always to trump the good news that’s happening in the religious world. But yet...

And I have given up my campaign to rectify movies that portray religious figures as buffoons and idiots in popular movies. “*Four Weddings and a Funeral*” would be the premier example of how badly clergy suffer from negative stereotyping. But yet....

I say “But yet...” because, despite how badly faith and belief and spirituality and religion are treated (or neglected), there is still within us all a deep desire, an incessant yearning to know the divine dimensions of life. Just think of it:

A little boy is awakened in the middle of the night. The immensity of God that he’s learned about in Sunday School startles him awake into complete befuddlement.

An earthquake shatters Japan, and a tsunami rams into the coast of Sendai, leaving devastation and heartache in its wake. And the eternal question arises: Where was God?

A couple desires to get married. The court house and a judge would be nice, but this couple wants something different. Even though they’re not members, they call up a church and schedule their wedding there.

A student prays hard. The exam’s coming up. Yes, there’s been a lot of late night and early morning studying. And the prayer isn’t a petition for magical assistance. The student’s prayer is for clear-headedness and mental acuity, so she’ll do her best.

Who do all these scenarios have in common? They all express – at one level or

another – the desire to be connected to something greater than ourselves. We want, we yearn to be more deeply related to the divine.

Today we launch a new sermon series – *CREDO: I Believe*. There is a deep hunger for God in everyone, and it's interesting to note how we express that hunger, sometimes even through idolatry, often through simple acts of grace and prayer, always with great yearning for completion and wholeness.

*Credo* is Latin for creed, which pertains to belief. The creeds we're going to dig into are not the traditional creeds. Neither the Nicene Creed nor the Apostles' Creed will have center stage here, though we may reference both of them in a forthcoming sermon. Nor are we trying to be sneaky and dive into the Affirmation of Faith of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), as beautiful as it is. No, the creed(s) we're going to explore are the commonly held beliefs, those strongholds of faith that are commonly held and essentially practiced.

### *Everyone's A Theologian*

Today we're examining the thesis "*Everyone's A Theologian*." Which is another way of describing the 500 year-old tradition of "*the priesthood of believers*." Since the fertile beginning of the Reformation, Protestants have clung closely to the notion that every Christian has both rights and responsibilities for their own connection with God. There's no intermediary necessary for any one to connect with God. We all have the right to relate to God personally and intimately. And we all have the responsibility to think through our faith careful and thoroughly. Willful ignorance is not an option.

Which means that since we believe in the priesthood of all believers, then everyone's a theologian, whether they recognize it or not.

And since everyone's a theologian, we have a lot of varied beliefs floating around, from the mundane to the sublime.

My mother had a strange theological notion. When I was anticipating something that would occur in the future, a project, the results of test at school, a church event, she'd say, "Well if you hold your mouth right, everything will come out well." Such a

strange bit of theology. I never did figure out what that meant.

Just recently I received a mailer announcing that you and I had better get ready for the end of the world on May 21, 2011. Through their theological insights and their calculations about Biblical prophecy, the exact date for the end of the world had been determined: May 21, 2011. Strange theology.

I have a minister friend who hates Easter. "They're all there, all of them," he says, in a kind of incensed frenzy that reminds you of Lewis Black. "I resent it," he says. He says, "The 'CEO's, Christmas-Easter-Only people, show up and expect me to like it that they're there." "Yes," I respond. "They're there! That's the point, don't you think? Can't you rejoice in that?" I ask him. "But they're all looking at me for something, and it's a lot of pressure. I mean this may be my only shot," he says.

It took me a while to really empathize with him, since I love Easter more than almost any other day on the Christian calendar. It's like a royal family reunion of those seeking a word about hope and goodness. And the proclamation is so powerful: Love - divine, eternal love, made manifest in our oh-so-human lives - conquers death, and that's what we are to celebrate on resurrection morning.

But my friend hates Easter, feels besieged, encompassed, pressured on Easter Sunday, as if a cloud of eyes are looking at him for a superior performance. He hates it. Strange theology.

Everyone's a theologian, *and* there's an astounding variety of theologies going on everywhere.

### *Paul at the Aeropagus*

Which is exactly what the Apostle Paul experienced when he was in Athens. Standing in the place where philosophers came to tease out their latest notions and where judicial disputes were resolved, the Apostle Paul delivers one of his most monumental missionary messages. At the Areopagus, the agora, or marketplace of ideas, also known as Mars Hill, after the Roman name for the god of war, Paul enters into the life and texture of the Athenian culture. He notices how replete with theologies they are and how idolatrous they have become with their theologies.

Paul gains the reputation of something of a babbler, his theological discourse sounds so strange. The word in the Greek literally translates as a derogatory term, “seed picker.” He’s like a bird to the heady Athenians, bobbing his head up and down, picking at one seed after another, at least it seems to the sophisticated onlookers, not making much sense. Paul keeps mentioning something about Jesus and his resurrection. And in the end he quotes one of the know poets of the day there in Athens and talks about the one true God, “...in [whom] we live and move and have our being.”<sup>1</sup>

### *Three Things Paul Does Right*

Now Paul does three things that are absolutely on target for registering his own theological claims:

- (1) He connects with the local folks by using one of the own terms. He sees an altar, at which a sign has been placed, “To an Unknown God.” And he uses that as his launching point for connecting their interest in God to the life and ministry of Jesus.
- (2) He invites a simple investigation of his own faith. It’s as of he’s saying “Check it out.” No big hard sell. Just a description of what has been done, and how all the little gods the Athenians have fashioned for themselves are really pointing to the one true God, whose gospel Paul has come to preach to them.
- (3) He cites secular literature, apparently very famous to the local folks, to make his point: “In him we live and move and have our being.”

Paul is an adroit preacher. He knows not to antagonize his listeners. But at the same time, he doesn’t compromise the gospel. He doesn’t water down his message. He doesn’t give the Athenians what Anne Lamott calls “*grace lite*.”<sup>2</sup>

### *If Everyone’s a Theologian*

#### *Which Theology is the Right One to Promote?*

At the point reasonable people ought to be asking one question: If everyone’s a theologian which theology deserves our most rapt attention and our most faithful devotion? Whew! I was worried that you were never going to ask that question!

Paul indicates the core of his beliefs and the most compelling piece of his preaching in two ways. One we know only from inference and not from a direct quotation. The other we have from a quote by Paul that sums up beautifully what life along the path of Jesus is all about.

Early in the scripture that was read this morning, it is indicated that Paul is decried as a “seedpicker” because he’s told the Athenians about a “foreign” (meaning different) way of understanding God’s presence. It all has to do with “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”<sup>3</sup>

This is a theology that is straightforward and that all theologians in the Christian camp can wrap their hearts, minds and souls around. “Jesus and the resurrection.” It’s not only simple and to the point. It’s the truest distillation of the Christian message we can get, really. “Jesus and the resurrection.”

Well theologians, if you were wondering what basic tenet you could hook your wagon to, here it is: “Jesus and the resurrection.” If someone asks us about substitutionary atonement, we can respond “Jesus and the resurrection.” If someone asks about the exact rules for obtaining God’s favor, we can simply talk about Jesus’ way of life and the possibility of new life for one and all who believe in the power of the resurrection.

Our theologies – I’m suggesting this morning, no I’m earnestly pleading for all of us to seize this morning!! – are all subsumed under the banner of life *in the spirit* and *by the path of Jesus* and the mysterious, wondrous, table-turning, life-altering renewal of resurrection, not only for Jesus but in our own lives, here and now and forever.

Everyone’s a theologian and we can have all kinds of cockamamie notions and ponderings and questions. And it will all be all right, if we we’ll harmonize our thinking and living with Paul’s seminal preaching on “*Jesus and the resurrection.*”

The second thing Paul does is to quote a poetic soul who uttered or inscribed the memorable words “*in him we live and move and have our being.*” Prior to this portion of his oration, Paul has described how the idolatrous altar with the inscription “to an unknown god” is actually a reference to the God of Genesis who brought everything

into being, and the God who gives breath and life to every creature, the God who gives them the compulsion to seek after the divine connection in the first place, the God “in him we live and move and have our being.” I, like you, perhaps, and like countless Christians, love that phrase. It never fails to inspire me. I suppose that is so, because of its simple powerful undeniability. In a beautiful triptych of simple words the Apostle Paul gives voice to the most succinct truth we know: God is everything. With God, we have everything we need. Without God, we don’t have anything worth having.

I like the way Clarence Jordan translates this phrase in the 28<sup>th</sup> verse: “...in him we come life, in him we are motivated, in him we find meaning.”<sup>4</sup> Alive, full of purpose and focus, and comforted into sanity and emboldened into generous love toward one another by God’s holy presence.

### *One Theologian to Another*

I’ve finally come to the point in my life and in my journey as a pastor, that I’m cutting to the chase as often as I can. If someone were to ask me what my main credo is, what my main theology is all about, I have a ready answer. I think it resonates with your answer to such a question, and I believe it harmonizes exactly with Paul’s monumental message in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. If someone were to ask me to summarize my personal theology in less than 50 words, I’d say, “*The way of Jesus and the key to understanding resurrection is knowing how powerful, cleansing, and healing love is. Love – real, genuine love, not some counterfeit substitute for it – is rather clear; love God, others, and yourself. As you do that, you will know God’s grace forever.*” Or I could say, in God “we live and move and have our being.” I believe that. More importantly, that’s the core of the credo of the Christian life.

How about we go to Athens, wherever our Athens may be, and tell everyone about Jesus and the resurrection? What’s the worst that could happen to us? That they’d call us “seedpickers”? AMEN.

#### NOTES

1 Acts 17:28

2 Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 163.

3 Acts 17:18c

4 Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts: Jesus’ Doings and the Happenings* (New York: Association Press/New Century Publishers, Inc., 1969). p. 133.