

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

America is very religious. Yes, you heard that right: America is very religious. But what about all those studies that say that the United States is becoming less religious?

What about this 2022 Gallup survey that found that those who believe in God in America has dropped from 98 percent in the 1950s to 81 percent today? What about the Gallup survey of Americans under 30 that found only 68 percent believe in God? What about the 2021 Gallup survey that found that fewer than half of Americans – 47 percent – were members of a church, a synagogue, or a mosque?

Still not budging. America is very religious.

America is so religious that we even build temples with tax dollars. What?! What happened to the “so-called” separation of church and state? Good question! Well, it doesn’t exist in the U.S. Constitution. You have likely heard it said, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.” This lie has been repeated so much that it is appearing as fact in textbooks.

Now, that I have caught your attention, where exactly are these temples being built by tax dollars? With likely the lone exception being Lambeau Field, every NFL stadium is taxpayer funded. In the recent years, each newly constructed stadium was built to make a statement. The Cowboys’ AT&T Stadium was built to be the largest domed structure in North America. The Colts’ Lucas Oil Stadium was built to showcase a retractable roof and retractable windows. Cardinals’ State Farm Stadium was built to be the first stadium with a retractable playing field. The Vikings’ US Bank Stadium was built in the style of a Nordic temple. The Rams’ and Chargers’ SoFi Field was built to have the first “Infinity Screen” that is an oval, double-sided video board that is suspended from the roof over the field. Each NFL stadium built is more impressive than the last. The game field hasn’t changed, but the amenities have changed. The same goes with baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer, but to a lesser extent than the NFL.

Along with the stadiums comes the liturgy within these temples. For example, the Vikings bang a war drum, fans clap their hands over their heads as they yell, “Skol!” It’s as expected as the Kyrie, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer in the Church. Attending a game in these temples, for many, is a religious event.

Now, I’m not here to turn you away from professional sports, but they can become an issue of idolatry when they become more important than the one true God. But, stadiums are not the only temples. Public schools from elementary to post-graduate schools are also places of religion. Instead of worshipping the true God, there are many false gods, including the earth with doom’s day prophecies, as well as gender confusion.

In our reading from Acts, St. Paul is walking about Athens. It appears that he had some sort of righteous indignation to what he saw, but he did his best on keeping it to himself. He noticed that the Athenians were highly cultured and sophisticated people who were deeply steeped in idolatry. Paul saw statues, altars, and shrines dedicated to a great number of deities. In fact, it had been said of Athens, that in that city there were more gods than men. It was customary to dedicate an altar to unknown gods so that they would not offend some deity by omitting it.

After Paul worked among the Jews and many devout Greeks in the synagogue and the marketplace, he began to strike up the conversation on many subjects, and eventually on Jesus and His resurrection. Notice that Paul didn’t begin by evangelizing. He began by gaining friendship and trust. He spoke in ways that would get the crowd around him interested enough to ask him questions. Now, some hearing Paul speak about Jesus and His resurrection just dismissed him as a mere babbler. Although most Greeks wanted to tell or hear of something new, some did not. But most did. They were intrigued because Paul was talking about a God that they had never heard about.

These Athenians were intrigued, so they soon escorted Paul to a meeting of their High Council called the Areopagus. There, they asked Paul to tell them more about the strange new ideas he had advanced, so that they would know what to make of them.

So, Paul begins saying, ***“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you”*** (Acts 17:22-23).

This is intriguing to the Greeks. They thought, “Tell me more about this unknown god!”

Notice what Paul says, “what therefore you worship” rather than “whom you worship.” This altar was dedicated to an unknown, impersonal “something.” Paul would make this unknown, impersonal “something” into the known: the living, personal God, the Creator of the universe and the judge of every human being.

By trying not to offend a forgotten god, the one true God used the Athenians’ pride to His advantage. Nothing happens by chance. This all led to this moment. Finally, after all this time, the triune God would use Paul to proclaim the one true God. No longer would they have to build state of the art temples to appease the false gods. For on this day, Paul speaks of the one true God, the one they ignorantly worshipped as “the unknown god” who is in reality the only true God. He, the Creator of the heavens and the earth and the preserver of all men and all things, cannot be confined to man-made temples, nor is He dependent on man’s worship.

Through the creation of one man, Adam, God created all the descendants of Adam. The nations who cover the earth in all their variety descended from a single ancestor, Adam. Each migration and accomplishment are in God’s hands. Empires rise and empires fall according to His will. Civilizations and cultures and the geography and history of nations are ordered by Him.

The triune God demonstrated His power and intelligence in creation and in the history of nations so that people would realize that an intelligent and powerful being is in charge of the universe. It is God’s intention that people should seek Him, reach for Him, and find Him. The Athenians built an altar to this God.

For the Athenians, this would take some time to sink in. For in Pagan religions, they confuse the Creator with His creation by teaching that everything is god. As America has become more Pagan, we see this with the worship of creation, instead of the Creator. Paul used their mistaken beliefs as a starting point from which to go on and to preach the gospel of the one true God.

Being then God’s offspring, how can a god come from us? So, if we build a temple with gold or silver or stone, it is just a structure formed by the imagination of man. Nothing more.

But what is most important is to know this unknown God, who is the one true God, is the judge and He calls everyone to repent of their idolatry. In the past, God had tolerated ignorance, but ignorance is not innocence. He chose not to destroy them. Now, God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and He calls on all people to turn from idols and to Him. The times of ignorance are over, God is calling His hearers to repentance.

Now is the time to turn from every false god to the living God and to His Son, Jesus Christ.

The question for us this morning is how does Paul's speech talk to us today? Our text is from Paul's second missionary journey. But we are not from Athens, and we don't worship some nondescript god. Or do we? We know who we are. We have the assurance that comes from faith in Jesus Christ. Aren't these words just for those other "religious people" out there? You know, the ones who aren't worshipping here.

Like the very religiously Pagan world around us, we too, can find ourselves caught up in false idols – money, sports, celebrities. The list goes on and on. Like the Athenians of Paul's day, we too need to repent of our sins. But unlike the unbelieving world, we have the Holy Spirit as our guide. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, we acknowledge our Savior from sin, Jesus Christ, who is the known God. He leaves an assurance in our heart and a peace that the world and its temples could never offer.

We are never left alone and we don't have to search for the proper God. Just as Jesus says, He does not leave us as orphans. He has given us His Means of Grace. These Means of Grace is how Jesus reveals Himself now in Word and Sacrament.

Like Athens then, America today is very religious. It's all a matter of who or what is our trust. What is the most important to you? What earthly thing can you not live without? Jesus knows that we may not always be loyal to Him, but He doesn't hold that against us. All He says is "Repent and believe." Jesus lovingly obeyed His Father for you. He lovingly obeyed all the way to the cross – since He knew that we needed saving. His resurrection appearances are proof to that. Salvation has been won and is freely given to all who believe in Jesus. In Christ alone, we have forgiveness, life, and salvation. We have the peace that those other "very religious" people need. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +