group Bible Study – May 9, 2007

Read Acts chapters 16-18

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This week our reading from Acts brings us to one of the most intriguing passages I’ve ever encountered in the scriptures – Paul’s speech in Athens, chapter 17. Have you heard of “Mars Hill”? Probably you have, because that name is being used all over the place these days. There are huge churches called Mars Hill throughout the country, there’s a graduate school in Seattle called Mars Hill – there are ministries and programs all over the place that are using this phrase. And this passage, Acts 17, is where it comes from.

Mars Hill is the English name given to the Areopagus – a public council in the city of Athens where Greek and Roman philosophers and judges held court for centuries. The author of Acts indicates that this was a place where the people “spent all their time talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” It was the place to go if you wanted to engage the culture and learn what was happening in the life of the mind – and that’s where we find the missionary Paul.

Paul makes a fascinating move at Mars Hill. He notices that the people there are misunderstanding the gospel that he is preaching. He is preaching “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18), but the people aren’t quite getting the point. They know the stories of Greek and Roman gods, but this doesn’t sound like one of the typical stories. They don’t understand this way or talking or thinking. So what does Paul do? Does he demand that they learn a new religious language in order to hear the message of Jesus?

The approach that Paul takes is to transform the thought and culture of the people not by rejecting it, but by explaining it in a fresh way. He points out an altar that he saw near Mars Hill, an altar “to an unknown god.” He uses this observation to proclaim the message of the God who has been revealed in Jesus. He then uses a quote from one of the religious poets that the people were already familiar with: “For in him we live and move and have our being,” and “we are his offspring” (Acts 17:28). He doesn’t tell the people that they’ve got it all wrong. What he says, essentially, is that they are on to something here. They’ve got part of the truth in their hands, and Paul has come to help them see more clearly how it all fits together in the story of God in Christ. The result of Paul’s efforts at Mars Hill is that some believe and follow him, and some mock him. That’s just the way it goes.

One of the primary lessons we can learn from Paul in this chapter is that he is not afraid to dive in to the thought and culture of his world. He is not intimidated by it. He does not feel the need to protect himself or wall himself off. He goes right to the heart of the great philosophies and religions of his world, he studies and understands what they are all about, and then he attempts to show the people that Jesus makes sense here too.

What does this mean for us? For myself, I think it means that I can walk through this world unashamed of the gospel and also unashamed of my humanity and my place in time and space. I will embrace it all – including the great things and the messed up things floating around together all around me. If I am going to be like Paul in this place, then my mission is not to ignore anything, but to see it all – and more than that, to see it all as it fits together in the story of God’s creation and redemption of this universe.