

Let us pray: O God of eternity, you are the God who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, our very life and breath. In you, we have... we live and move and have our very being. Fill our hearts now with your vision for the world, and bring it to life in us as we follow in the way of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Wow, what a difference meeting Jesus makes in one's life, as is evident through Paul this morning; previously known as Saul. Paul has shifted from one whose life goal was to persecute and imprison people under the letter of the Jewish law, the religious law, to setting them free under the power of God's grace given to them, given to the world, in Jesus.

As Paul awaited the arrival of Timothy and Silas in Athens, he found himself surrounded by religious statuary, and overwhelmed by it. Not overwhelmed to the extent that he couldn't do anything or say anything, but moved by it, to do something, to say something.

We need to remember that Athens in the mid-first century was a living museum to this type of statuary. In fact, ancient writers have claimed that more gods than men resided in that city. Has anybody here been to Athens? I have not. Lynn has. Yeah, Karen, you have also. We could only hope to go there someday, right, sweetheart?

Our text tells us that in his distress, Paul looked at things—looked at the people living amongst these... this statuary...and saw them as living under a form of spiritual bondage because they were placing their trust in these man-made items.

While the residents of Athens viewed the visual overload of marble and bronze and gold and silver as cultural sophistication, to Paul it signaled something very different. It signaled a society that was estranged from the Creator; from our very center.

Much like... When we'd never get outside and look at what's around us. Look at the creation and live in the creation that God gives us. And isn't that what idolatry is, after all? When we lose sight of God in the midst of our everyday lives?

And the things in life that we cling to often not only misrepresent God's nature, but enslave us to our own work. The work of our own hands. Work that Jesus has taken from us by freeing us in grace, in love, in sacrifice. Not saying that we don't ever work again, but that we're not doing it to accomplish our own salvation.

The Greek term that our text uses this morning, full of idols that Michelle read early on, describes the world which inevitably emerges when humanity loses sight of God of our Creator; loses sight of the Creator's hand moving throughout that creation, and replaces the power of God with mortal images.

And like the Athenians, we live in a world saturated by modern-day idols, don't we? And sometimes they are things. Sometimes they're people. Sometimes they're way of life. They come in the form of actual statues, or

man-made creations, but they also come in the form of followings, of attitudes, of desires, materialism, individualism. Even our... Striving for absolute independence from anyone and anything.

They come in the forms of entertainment, political ideology, anything that sits on the thrones of our human hearts. That's what our modern-day idols look like.

The challenge for us now becomes discerning the modern-day idols in our everyday lives. What are those idols for me? What are those idols for you, the things that pull you away from God?

You know, we read a little bit earlier that, that Paul's work was... it was talking about repenting. And to repent is to turn back to God, to look for God in everything and what God's will is for us.

This is the challenge that our faith in Jesus calls us to in every moment of every day, to view things through the lens of that old adage, that old bracelet so many of us used to wear, that said WWJD. What would Jesus do? Remember those from so far back?

It's the difference between unquestioning belief in Jesus the Christ and the doctrines that surround Him, such as His conception, His birth, His teachings, His death, and His resurrection. Everything—the very things that we recite in our Apostles' Creed when we use that—to a life that's embedded in spiritual challenge; in compassion; in living in community.

And it's certainly not a matter of setting those creeds aside, because they are crucial to us. They remain intact as our personal and our public statements, our confessions of what it is that we believe. They're the very arguments that Paul made to the Athenians as he gave the unknown God in their midst a name as he brought that God's power to life.

The God that's present in Jesus, the firstborn. The living, the teaching, the crucified, the resurrected and risen Christ.

It's the matter of how our life reflects the difference knowing Jesus—actually knowing Jesus, not knowing about Him or of Him but actually knowing Him—makes in the living of our everyday lives. And it matters for us and for the sake of the world.

This is about that point in time when our faith actually finds traction. When the rubber meets the road, When our minds have, yes, taken the time to explore and then made a decision to surrender.

It's the point where we're finally willing to give up our very hearts—our very selves at the deepest level—to the living, breathing Lord that resides not only among us, but within us. It's that point where Jesus is no longer hanging crucified on the cross—that's why we have an empty cross here.

He's no longer wrapped in the grave clothes. Those have been left behind. He's no longer resting in the sealed tomb for all of eternity. It's the Christ physically risen, unwrapped, set free,

released from the tomb. It's the one we encounter when we see him in our daily lives and when we claim that freedom that His death has granted us, that His resurrection has granted us.

It's what our bishop and her staff last week called *Vida En Cristo* as the theme of our recent annual assembly something that Pastor Phil and Kathy talked about eloquently last week, shared with us. *Vida En Cristo*. Life in Christ.

It's about how our faith in Christ shapes us. Not just in the time that we're sitting here, but in all aspects of our lives. It's about how we share our faith in our encounters with others.

Paul sets a great example for us here this morning in today's reading from Acts. And notice what he does even when they tell us that he's in a time of deep distress. We're told that he argued in the synagogues with the Jews and the devout persons. He argued in the marketplace with those who happened to be there. Kinda sounds a bit like what's going on around us every day, isn't it, as we look at all the chatter in the world?

One of the things that defines what our text tells us this morning is an understanding of the nature of the word translated here as argue. I don't like arguing personally. I know what that word means to me, and you likely have your own ideas about what arguing looks like, but what matters to us this morning is what the author of this book is trying to convey to us, to his readers, even all these centuries later.

The Greek word translated as argue in our text means to discuss. It means to reason, to be in dialogue with each other. I think of arguing as loud voices, heated emotions, when it's actually a word that's defined as a passionate discussion with the intent of getting one's point across.

The Greek word is much more nuanced than our—my—understanding of arguing. It's dialectical reasoning, the process of both giving out and receiving back information with someone with a purpose—in order to reach a deeper understanding with each other. We need more of that in this world, don't we?

This is what Paul was doing in this story that we read this morning even though he was deeply distressed. He met these Athenians where they were. He came to them, he sat and he dialogued with them. He not only spoke to them and told them his own understandings, but he listened to what they had to say.

And we're told from the outset that he didn't discount their lives. He had his internal feelings, certainly, but he did not discount their lives. He didn't condemn them for what felt to him like blatant idolatry. He didn't do any of those things.

He met with them. He talked with them. He took the seed of their desire for something to worship, and he cracked it open. He invited them to move from merely gazing on something that was created by human hands to actual spiritual discernment. Kind of that question that Jesus asked the disciples at the beginning: What are you looking for? What are you looking for?

He invited them into intelligent engagement by engaging in the local culture, the scriptural insights that he had and the writings of the poets of Athens. He did this so that they might be able to move toward their own spiritual insights because that's our inner work. That we're called to.

In other words, he engaged all the aspects of what it means to be human. What it means to be human. All of our senses, and then some. It's moving from just hearing and seeing to what we actually think about what we've heard, and what we've seen.

And then, when we spend some time there, it's moving from what we think about what we've heard, and what we've seen, to how it actually makes us feel. And from there, it's about what we feel being translated through the lens of what Jesus teaches us and the experience, most importantly, of grace that we experience. For the rest of our lives. Through no work of our own because of what Jesus did.

These are the most telling marks of a growing Christian. And one thing we know for sure is that Jesus calls us to grow in Him, through Him, by Him, with Him, and to never stop growing. Living life—a life in Christ—is about constantly growing. It's to continue to grow into the identity that we have received through the gift of God's grace.

And that means pruning back the dead parts that don't serve God's deepest desire for the world so that new growth can emerge that truly reflects God's desires for the world, for all of creation and humanity. It's the pruning that makes way for the fruit of the Spirit to emerge. A spirit that has been blown upon us and moves within us. Vida en Cristo—Life in Christ—means growing. Growing in compassion. Growing in generosity. Growing in our ability to forgive both ourselves and others.

It's opening ourselves to the Word and the will of God, so that the true fruit of the Spirit is able to emerge. The spirit of love, which means acting in the best interest of others. The spirit of joy, that of deep-seated gladness, that isn't dependent upon our life circumstances.

The spirit of peace, which is inner calm. And the spirit of patience: Going through difficult situations, or dealing with difficult people without anger. And that doesn't mean we don't get angry. It means that we process that anger. We get through it. We make a choice that it's not going to consume us.

It's the spirit of kindness, compassion towards those around us, and goodness. Expressing integrity in every aspect of our lives, whether it's visible to those around us, or something internal.

It's the spirit of faithfulness: Being reliable and loyal and worthy of trust. That of gentleness: Finding calm and humility in dealing with others. And self-control, which means managing our desires and our passions.

Although these are listed as nine in Scripture, this is known to and referred to as a singular fruit, suggesting a deeper meaning. They're meant to grow together as a complete and balanced package of the character of our

lives. And they're not given so that we can use them to look at someone else and decide if they're doing a good job of it or not.

This is our inner work. This is a process, and it's one given to each of us as individuals, as well as to us as a faith family, as well as to us as the entire body of Christ, the world throughout, for all time, past, present, future. It's the process our faith calls us to.

Just like an apple doesn't just magically appear on an apple tree one day, so is this development of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. It takes time. It takes time to nourish and nurture.

It begins with the placement of that seed in the earth, and that's something God has already done in us. It's not our work. It's already been done for us. The seed then splits open. Something happens to break it open, allowing a shoot to emerge from it.

And in order for the shoot to grow, it needs nourishment, it needs watering, it needs weeding. And that has to be intentional, something we work at. That's part of our work.

With sufficient growth, we know then that the branches emerge, then the leaves and the buds, and suddenly a beautiful, fragrant flower appears and gives way to a piece of fruit. Something that we can actually see.

A fruit which needs to be protected from predators, from disease, from infestation, so that it might develop into the sweetest, most juicy and delicious ripened form, something that gives joy, and gives pleasure, and gives nourishment, not just to us, but to everyone around us.

If you've ever had an apple tree, you know what I'm talking about. Or a cherry tree, or any of those things. And in our lives, the things that it needs to be protected from takes the form of the idols that surround us that try to just kind of pick away at that faith.

This faith is a gift from God, and it's a gift that's given to nourish us, yes, to bring us joy in life, but also to nourish the entire world. As our Gospel reading tells us this morning, from His fullness we have all received. Did you notice that? All? That's a big, small word, isn't it?

All. Because there's nothing that's left out. We have all received grace upon grace. The law was indeed given through Moses. Grace and truth come through Jesus Christ. That's what draws us here.

It goes on to say, no one has ever seen God. It is God, the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made Him known. You all know Jesus, don't you? I want to see the heads nod here.

Yes. You know Jesus. But you know what's more important? Jesus knows all of you. Every one of you. Jim and Sally and Lori, Donna, June, and Jim, and Kathy, and Kelly, and Rick. And Mary, And Janice, there you are again. And Claire, and Dorothy, and everybody around you.

Jesus knows us all, everybody sitting here.

Through you, as you nurture your Vida en Cristo, your life in Christ, God can become more known to the world.
So let your life in Christ sing for all the world to see. It matters. Amen.