

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2017

Text: Acts 17:16-31
Theme: “You’re On!”

It’s the big moment—you’re on! You are on the big stage. What would it be like to perform at Carnegie Hall? It’s a big deal and on the other hand, maybe not that big of a deal. Carnegie Hall has three different areas to rent for performance. The smallest seats fewer than 300 people and if you have a few thousand dollars, you can have the stage. If the slot is open and you have the cash, you can make it happen. But would you still have a little uneasiness, a little edgy about the moment?

We do have a big moments in life. Suddenly you are on. I may be a big presentation. It could perhaps be the first time you have opportunity to do what you have been training for—the first arguments before a jury, your solo in a musical, the first sermon you have ever preached. It could leave feeling a little like this (a block full of needles and pins).

What if your big moment was a knife act? Knives are being thrown all around the perimeter of your body, or you are the thrower. Would this be a little nerve wrecking—not much room for error.

In our text Paul is on the big stage. It’s not a knife act and it’s not Carnegie Hall, yet it is a big moment and Paul just could have been a little on edge. If those present did not like his words, would there be dagger eyes, and maybe razor tongues against him? Not it’s not Carnegie Hall, but in a way it was the orator’s equivalent for the day. It was the Areopagus in

Athens (not Georgia, Greece). I don't think speaking here was for rent, no, it was by invitation. Those in the know would invite you if they wanted you to make known to them what you claimed to know. It was a place for men with plenty of time on their hands—so it seemed. Luke tells us here in Acts 17 that those present “spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” (vs 21) Two different groups of philosophers are named for us—Epicureans and Stoics. They had two different schools of thought as to how everything was put together. For one group, the Epicureans, all was comprised of an assortment of atoms, and not all atoms were created equal. The good life was a matter of going with the flow of things. Epicureans thought pleasure a good thing, but they were not hedonists necessarily. It was not thought wise to maximize pleasure at all costs. If you did you were setting yourself up for maximum hurt as well.

For the Stoics there was order, much order. Knowing and living in that order was a good thing, a pursuing of virtue. For the Stoics God was like the soul of the cosmos who held it all together and directed it. That's not telling you a lot, but since I'm not an expert on such subjects, I don't have a whole lot more to tell you. The main point as far as our text is concerned is not what each school of thought purported to know, but that these leading thinkers wanted to know more of what Paul knew. They were trying to figure it out.

Paul's speaking with anyone who happened along in the marketplace had grabbed their ears. The city full of idols has provoked his spirit. So He speaks and his speaking is heard, but what does it mean? This talk of

the resurrection of Jesus, what was that all about? What was this babbler trying to say? It was all foreign to their ears. “For you bring strange things to our ears. We wish to know what these things mean.” (vs 20) So they bring him to the Areopagus so he can tell. “You’re on, Paul!” Were there pins and needles for Paul? Did he fear daggers as he opened his mouth to speak?

Is our spirit provoked in our culture full of idols? An idol with a big draw is materialism—stuff. It’s pretty amazing this amount of stuff that is available. So many clothes, furniture, cars, trucks, boats, computers, toys, smartphones, tablets. Then there are the structures to hold our idols, houses, that in themselves can be like idols. Renting out space for idol overflow, storage units, is big business.

Then there is the idol of happiness, yes, an obsession with happiness. The happiness that is pursued is most likely different than such pursuit named in the Declaration of Independence. Happiness is sought in the pursuit of the fulfillment of desires or perceived bent. This could lead to the accumulation of a lot of the first idol—stuff. A lot of it seems to be tied with the pursuit of sexual desire. There are more than a few who say, “What’s the big deal; it’s just sex?” And with that attitude this great gift from God is cheapened in a deluded pursuit of the desire, whatever that desire might be, at all costs. This could be manifested in pornography, partner after partner, whatever. It need not, so it is thought and proclaimed, be subject to the boundaries of biology—desire is the driving

factor. So be a man about this, or become a man, or a woman. What do chromosomes really have to do with it?

The very nature of marriage is changed. It is not longer about mutual companionship and care in a relationship for the begetting and raising of children. Not, it's about mutual consent to the emotional desire of each. Marriage goes from being foundational to society to the elevation of sensuality as king. We have a different marriage song to sing, the one of the Scriptures, that of one man for one woman for one lifetime.

Are we ready to sing it? You're on, on at school, the work place, the mall (or the keyboard when it comes what to buy and what to closeout quickly). By what we say or don't say, by what we do or don't do, we stand out. Are we ready to sing the song of why, the song of the hope that we have within us?

We could be (are?) reluctant. There could be some sharp objects coming our way. We might well have something to lose, like stuff. We may miss out on a lot of stuff because we just refuse to accumulate indiscriminately. We can lose a lot of time. Oh, we don't really lose time. We just use more of it to help others rather than indulge me. You can quickly lose your reputation. The cool, enlightened, open-minded tag is ripped right off. In it's place is the brand of simple, intolerant, or even bigot. There could be the pin pricks of financial loss or even the stab of a major cut in resources.

You're on! Hit it! But I don't know if I should or can?

So Paul is primed to speak. He has just come through some pin cushion experiences in Thessalonica and Berea. In Thessalonica he proclaims the gospel in the synagogue. People are being persuaded, believing. Then there is quite a stir by the unbelieving Jews. There is a mob, the city is in a uproar and then Paul and Silas are sent away by the believers.” (Acts 17:1-10). It’s on to Berea. It was going quite well there until the unbelieving Jews came in from Thessalonica. There is more stirring. Paul is sent on to Athens to await the arrival of Silas and Timothy.

Yes, I would think pins and needles for Paul, a few jabs and stabs. He is provoked I the spirit. The word can be translated “sharpened” (*paroxu, nw, paroxuno*) Paul is edgy for a reason. He is ready to give a reason for the hope that is in him, ready for anyone who will listen.

He was primed, sharpened for the task. He himself has been cut to the heart with the message. On the road to Damascus the risen and ascended Jesus had said to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” (Acts 26:14) A goad is a sharpened stick. It was used to persuade oxen to go on the right path. Paul was going against the goad of God’s will for his life as he was persecuting Christ by persecuting Christians.

Paul is turned, how he is turned. He is baptized, buried with Christ, raised with Him now to serve Him, not oppose Him. All his extensive training in the law is now turned to the service of the Lord Jesus. Paul has a new song to sing, those sweet words of forgiveness in Jesus. Paul knew that Christ had been on for him, on the big stage of walking in the will of

the Father. This was God the Son, the biggest of the big, who had come to walk in humility. His followers had really big plans, dreams, the big stage of David's throne in Jerusalem. But it would be on the cross instead. Peter speaks of it in our lesson from 1 Peter 3, "For Christ suffered for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." (1 Peter 3:18) This perfect Son had made the perfect sacrifice on the cross for all sins. He proclaims His victory, not His defeat on Satan's home court in the spirit. On the third day He will rise in the flesh and show Himself alive to many witnesses over the next 40 days.

Paul knew the message, believed it, proclaimed it. He was not ashamed of it as it was the power of God for salvation for all. He would say, "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel." (2 Corinthians 9:16)

So Paul is put on edge by all these idols. He is primed, sharpened to give an answer and he does. He does so as Peter instructs us, with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:16). The aim is not words that cut in themselves, but words in service of the message that will cut to the heart. It's not like the day of Pentecost. Three thousand are not baptized there on the Areopagus. We read in verses 32-34 that some mocked, others wanted to hear Paul again and some joined and believed. Dionysius is named as also is a woman, Damaris, and some others with her. No, it's not 3000, but if Paul had not spoken, not sung when it was time, there would have been none.

We are called to give the same answer. We have the same answer. We have the same words of the law that cuts to heart, that is, convicts of sin, and the same Gospel that convinces of Christ, gives a new heart.

In our lesson from 1 Peter 3, we are assured that we are borne in the saving ark of baptism. We have been rescued from sin, from our flesh, the world, and the devil. We have been new to speak the right thing, do the right thing, though more than a few pin pricks may come our way.

“You’re on,” and we speak. It is not the sharp tongue that cuts and puts into place. Not, it is the tongue that declares the mercy, grace, and forgiveness of Christ. Whether faith results or not is not our responsibility. That is the work of the Spirit. We give thanks that those before us have given answer. When we’re on, which is more often than we think, we pray we may do the same. For Jesus’ sake. Amen