



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Easter 6 (A)

May 10, 2026

RCL: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Opening Prayer |

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Context |

In Eastertide, the lections turn toward passages in Acts, in which we see the earliest disciples wrestling with questions about how to be a community amidst their profound diversity. Questions of how worship should happen, who should belong, and what should be risked in the preaching of the Gospel are all examined across the book of Acts. The church—which often welcomes more newcomers and new believers in the days following Easter—can learn a lot from these early narratives.

In today's passage, Paul moves from Thessalonica to the great city of Athens, where he begins teaching in not only the synagogues, but also the agora—a great marketplace bustling with courts of law, religious temples, public shops, and speaker platforms. The agora was the civil heart of Athens: Socrates would teach there; Diogenes the Cynic lit his lamp there. It was the center of business, politics, and social activities, where both foreigners and locals alike would gather to exchange stories, make deals, and hear the law and ethics interpreted. Paul pays attention to this community in his first days in Athens; he listens and learns what

matters most to the local people, even as he feels personally uncomfortable with the overwhelming number of idols present in their midst.

When Paul does finally speak in the agora, he speaks in a different style than his usual rhetoric, usually infused with references to Jewish tradition. Now, while he addresses the Athenians here in a way aimed to catch their attention, he still speaks with integrity—he does not alter or change the fundamental message of the Good News.

The novelty of Paul’s message prompts an invitation to the Areopagus, a high court of Athens which was also home to several temples. It is unclear whether he was called there to raise a legal defense for preaching on a foreign god (which was illegal), or meant to give a teaching lecture on God. Regardless of what was intended, Paul impresses his listeners and gains several new converts in Athens to the way of Jesus Christ.

Theological Reflection |

Paul stood in the busiest marketplace he could find and launched the most shocking argument: God lived as a human being and died, so that all nations could live free. Imagine that for a moment. Imagine hearing that argument again, for the very first time. Imagine Paul’s invitation to see the world as he saw it, to find beauty and holiness across religious expression, beyond language, ethnicity, social class, and gender. Paul called all away from their known path—beyond their own experience—to see the world as Jesus sees it. And that may be enough to transform lives: just to see the world as God sees it. But listen to Paul’s call in this text again, and consider this question: What is Paul calling for?

Paul’s strategy for evangelism in Athens is simple, but effective: Listen first, relate second, and speak last. When he arrives in this foreign land, he listens first with his whole body, taking in the press of the crowd, the temple inscriptions, the cries of devotion, the smell of burnt offerings, and the rigors of the debate form. Some of what he sees distresses him; he is challenged by the graven images in the temples and throughout the city, and by the presence of the idols he sees many people worshiping. But Paul moves beyond distress and instead connects with the Athenians where they are, honoring what they all have in common. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way,” Paul says, offering admiration at their careful piety before praising the wisdom of their artists. “As even some of your own poets have said, ‘...we too are [God’s] offspring.’” He starts with common ground, even appreciation. In the end, Paul’s days in the agora were well spent, because he comes to relate to the people gathered around him at the Areopagus; he knows their Unknown God, their poets, the way they speak in a crowd. He relates their experience of the divine to his, and builds on it, speaking only after he has first established that he has listened to them, that he now knows and respects their ways.

During his sermon, Paul reminds the Athenians that God calls us toward encounter, community, a seeking for and perhaps only finding God together, for it is “in [God] we live and move and have our being.” Paul stands at the bustling market, in order to draw all types of people—people from radically different places—toward God and so toward each other. He speaks to the highest court he can, to claim the greatest truth he knows: That the resurrection is for all nations, and that the unknown, true God has become known through Jesus Christ.

In that movement the purpose of Paul’s call is revealed: To teach that it is not in the golden idols, or the carved marble courts, or even the human imagination, that God resides. God is found, instead, in the love of Jesus Christ, who lived and died so that all might be adopted into the family of God. Paul calls *all* people, bringing us all together to discover the holy at home in the human—and, because of that, to discover the holiness all humanity is called to live into.

“God,” Paul instructs his listeners, “is not far from each one of us,” and is perhaps as close as your neighbor—even the one who looks, believes, and speaks differently than you.

Reflection Questions |

- Where in your life right now might you need to listen first, relate second, and speak last?
- Reflect on someone -- in your neighborhood, parish, or workplace -- who challenges your world view. What might you share in common? How might you foster connection with them?
- Paul tells his listeners that God “not far from each one of us”. Where are you experiencing -- not far from you -- God’s love and mercy in this moment?

Faith in Practice |

This week, play the stranger in your own town. Explore a new coffee shop or grocery store, read up on different volunteer organizations, try a new library, or take a new route to work or school. What do you notice? Where do you find common interests or feelings, and where do you feel a stranger? Reflect on your experiences and then choose one intentional act of connection: Make small talk in that coffee shop, take or start a class at the library, or write thank you notes to one of those volunteer groups.

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