

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Out of Our Control”
Acts 17: 16-34
May 21, 2017

It is fitting that on this day of Davidson College commencement, the culmination of four years of rigorous academic study, that we turn to Paul’s sermon recounted in Acts 17, a sermon preached to a congregation of intellectuals.

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The book of Acts is replete with stories of worship services with megachurch-size congregations that could pack the seats at Baker Arena. Peter preached a sermon at Pentecost, and 3000 people joined the next new member class. And that was just for starters. His next sermon led to 5000 converts.

But preachers of non-megachurches everywhere are grateful for Acts 17.

Paul gave the sermon that he delivered in Athens his everything. He began with a complimentary word about the Athenians’ religious observance, a nice opener that seemingly would give no offense to any of his listeners. He then refers to the altar dedicated to the unknown god, taking a profoundly biblical theme and connecting it to the local situation. He quoted a poem, and, most importantly, he kept his sermon short! (1)

But the response...meh!

In response to Paul’s sermon, there were, according to Acts, a mere handful of converts, “Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”

Perhaps it is because today’s sermon is being preached to what I rightly predicted would be a very small congregation inside the walls of Davidson College Presbyterian Church at the very moment that a much, much, much larger crowd is assembling outside our front door for the 2017 commencement ceremony of Davidson College, a great celebration of intellectual achievement, that I have been especially drawn to thinking about Dionysius and Damaris and the handful of others among all of the brainiacs who listened to Paul’s sermon that day and what it was that enabled them to be moved to receive the good news that Paul preached and to enfold this good news into the creases of their hearts while others who heard the very same sermon cynically scoffed or said, “We will give it some thought and, who knows, maybe we’ll invite you back...we’ll let you know,” uttered in a tone that insinuates that lets you know that they never will!

First, and almost surely, it was the content of the sermon itself which impacted Dionysius and Damaris and the others. As Baylor professor and New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa points out, Paul’s entire sermon relentlessly concerns itself with the life-giving power of God. God “made the world and everything in it.” God “made all nations to inhabit the whole earth.” God “commands all people everywhere to repent.” God raised Jesus from the dead. God is the central actor in virtually every phrase. The sermon reflects the entire sweep of the biblical narrative. From the opening lines of

Genesis, through the psalms and the law and the prophets, through the gospels and the epistles, and on to Revelation, there is a single crucial conviction: life belongs to God alone. (1)

And there is the rub, isn't it?

There are so many commencement speeches during this season. And there is the very American refrain in so many of these commencement speeches which reflects the American virtue: work hard and you can control your destiny.

And surely there is a kernel of good advice in this.

Just last week, I heard Oprah deliver the commencement speech at Agnes Scott College. (And yes, I got to meet her! She didn't, however, give me a car!) She talked about how people will say disparagingly, especially to women: She's so full of yourself. Oprah exhorted the smart, imaginative, achieving women of Agnes Scott: Be full of yourself so that you have a lot in your cup to run over and bless and benefit the world. It was a great message!

But the good news of the gospel is greater even than this.

And there must have been something within Dionysius and Damaris and those few others whose names we will never know that enabled them to receive this good news that our lives are not ours to control for they belong ultimately to God.

Nora Tisdale is currently a professor at Yale Divinity School. In her recently published book, *The Sun Still Rises*, she writes that she has always been one of those people who felt that she could deal with anything, but then she was diagnosed with cancer in the very same month that she began a new job.

"At first I could only shake my fist at the timing, because I had been extremely excited about this new call of God upon my life and was eager to jump in with my whole being to undertake the tasks before me. The last thing I wanted was a serious illness to impinge on my ability to function well.

But cancer, as I quickly learned, is no respecter of clocks or calls or plans. It has its own timing, and ordinary activities of life and ministry simply have to learn to get in line behind the more pressing matters like doctors' appointments, medical tests, surgeries, and treatments—not to mention the enormous energy required for healing itself...(3)

"What I found I most needed...probably more than at any other time in my life—are signs of hope. Anything that speaks of hope and life and light are welcome to me." (4)

I have no idea what was going on in Damaris's and Dionysius's lives at the moment that they heard Paul preach a sermon on that long-ago day. However, I have a hunch that they got a glimpse that when all is said and done, there is not much in this life that is within our control, and that when life rises up and socks one in the solar plexus, what we most need is a sign of hope.

And I have a hunch that they got that sign of hope when Paul talked to them about a man who was raised from the dead.

1. Beverly R. Gaventa, "Life comes from God," *The Christian Century*, April 29, 1993, 451.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *The Sun Still Rises: Meditations on Faith at Midlife* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 75.
4. *Ibid.*, 43.