

Sermon 052718 Arguments
Scripture Acts 17: 16-32
Sermon Title- Losing Arguments

There is a lot to dislike about our current political atmosphere in this country. One unfortunate thing is that people seem to have retreated to opposite poles. The moderate middle is ignored or shouted down by the extremes. Another painful thing is that sensible political discussion has gone the way of the eight-track tape. People have lost the ability to disagree without being disagreeable.

Discussion turns into argument before it even begins. Verbal bomb throwing has replaced respectful disagreement. I'm reading a book now, *The Soul of America* by Jon Meacham that documents this. The book is a hopeful book because it shows that we, as a nation, have been here before. In fact, the political atmosphere has been much worse. The Civil War is example number one. History has shown that there has been someone who comes along who successfully calls us to our better angles. Sadly, religious disagreement can and often does get into the same sort of ugliness.

When, I read the lesson for today from the Acts of the Apostles and coincidentally, I read about St. Paul in a religious argument in Athens and it goes badly. So, here it is, another bite at the doubt apple, another look at this world of religious people doubting religious beliefs and arguing about religious beliefs. Now, I need to set the scene for you, as it is unusual.

The fairly unsuccessful argument in the remarkable account has Paul going up against the Greeks in Athens. The place was then known in Athens as the Areopagus, but we usually think of it as Paul's sermon on Mars Hill. It is not really a sermon, though. Paul is trying to evangelize the Athenians and what starts out as a sermon ends up more as a debate. By the way, I'd prefer to keep this part of the story in the Bible. I'm not, trust me, inviting any of you to stand up here and start debating me on my sermon points, thank you very much. I'm available in fellowship time and all week long if you'd like.

Paul, if you read earlier in chapter 17, had been walking around Athens disgusted, annoyed, and ticked off with the number of pagan monuments, temples, idols, and alters he saw. Actually, to the Athenians, it was Paul who was the pagan. Athens was the most sophisticated place in the world at the time. This was the place of the best and the brightest, the shakers and movers, who at that time were the philosophers. Picture Paul, a Christian Jew with Greek learning and Roman Citizenship, who decides to take on these people. Today, this might be like taking on the debate team at Harvard. At one point in the story, one of the Greeks says, "What is this babbler trying to say?" The response from the group is that Paul is trying to sell foreign gods, he seems to be trying to argue us into some other form of religion, they say. That is the moment, according to the text, that Paul begins to speak of them of the resurrection.

Now, interestingly, Paul won some points but not many hearts. There are a few folks, a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris seem to follow Paul and become believers. But for the assembly, there was little interest. Someone said, “We’ll hear more from you on this” indicating curiosity, but no conversion. But mostly there was snickering from the high and mighty; the text says that Paul was mocked. It is worthy of note that there are no surviving letters from Paul to the Athenians. We have letters from Paul to churches he started in Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Galacia, and Ephesus, but none to Athens. It looks like Paul started no church there. He had a failed mission in Athens. The stakes were high, Paul’s arguments were sound, but the yield very small indeed.

Now, I’m going to guess that we’ve all been, in a manner of speaking, in Paul’s sandals. Most of us know the sad experience of arguments that fail: your premise was sound, the logic impeccable, the diction superb, and all that is wrong is that the other person is too thick-headed to be persuaded by your brilliant analysis. This story reminds us that sadly, that our arguments fail much more than they win. When was the last time you won a thumping victory in an argument and kept your friend? When was the last time all your points came together in a pounding crescendo and you walked away the undisputed winner of the debate? Even when you deliver the pithy zing line with perfect timing, pitch, and timber of which you were so proud; did you ever actually win

the day? Even when you are right, you've got the right argument, the right circumstances, the facts, the passion, but you can't put it together to convince another breathing human being. More often than not, our arguments fail more than they win. I've belonged to health clubs for decades and I go in and work out three to five times a week, on average. I always feel better when I leave the health club than when I arrive. The exact opposite is true of arguments. I always feel worse leaving them than when I arrived, a lot worse.

There is nothing in the text, but I've got to believe that in Paul's disappointment in leaving Mars Hill, he reviewed his arguments like we so often do. He must have said, I should have said this instead of that. I do that sort of thing all the time. I should have used this other, more precise argument or I wish I remembered this perfect illustration at the time. I always come up with my best retorts after the encounter is over. We are always better in reruns when we slay 'em dead with the power of our one- liners and our irony after the fact, after the arguments that fail.

Now remember, the precise argument that Paul was engaged in on the hillside was about the resurrection. The resurrection is simultaneously the high point of our Christian faith- the reason that we ever even heard of Jesus and we follow him, but it is also the easiest thing for non-believers to point out to be at best a crazy proposition. So, how do we avoid getting into arguments about the resurrection and other points of Christian belief?

It's easy. Easter does not depend upon an effective argument but upon convincing experience. Debaters have no retorts in the face of faithful people who know Jesus and the power of his resurrection by the experience of newness in their own lives. When we experience God, and live according to that experience, we will need neither argument nor explanation. The experience of God, the life of faith will show the world all it needs to know.

Not all good arguments win most of the time, and not all bad arguments fail. The resurrection, to the original apostles, seemed but a weak argument until it was superseded by the experience of the risen Christ that they themselves had. At that moment, their own poor lives were renovated, resuscitated, transformed by the reality of new life and new being. That is what is available to all of us 2000 years later, and it has happened all over the planet over that span of that time. Our arguments may not always work, but our work is to live the life of the One who lives in us. To live in Christ is to transcend all arguments. Indeed, the greatest argument for the validity of the Christian life is the life of the Christian. We are the argument for the resurrection; we are living proof for the existence of God. I've said it before and I'll say it again. The resurrection is not just about Jesus and what happened to him 20 centuries ago. It is about you and me and how we conduct our lives.

“They’ll know we are Christians by our love...” goes our next hymn, and the best argument is to live as that hymn says. Arguments fail, experience never; and for that we thank the living God. AMEN