

Psalm 66:8–20; Acts 17:22–31

At the risk of sounding a bit whacked out, and also at the risk of getting some of the married men in here in trouble, I have to say that I really love my front loading washing machine. Now the reason that I really love my front loading washing machine is that, in the Brock household, I do the laundry (which is why I am sorry to all of you guys who do not do the laundry that I may be getting you in trouble). It began many years ago. I'm not sure if it began immediately when we got married, but I know for sure that by the time we started seminary, which was about three years into our marriage, that I definitely started doing the laundry all the time. For several reasons: I do believe in trying to split up various household chores: the laundry, yard work, taking care of the cars, cleaning, cooking, getting the kids off to school, meeting the school bus when it comes home and stuff like that.

But, I do the laundry because, among other things, the laundry is one of those things that I can see results. So often in my ministry, I don't get to see results. Yes, I have pages of a sermon written here, but I don't know what kind of results my sermons are going to produce. The same thing with a Bible study: I can write out pages of a Bible study, sit down and have a wonderful hour long or so discussion on a Bible study, but I will really never know what kind of an impact that Bible study is going to make on any one person's life. On the other hand, you run out of clean underwear, I have made an *immediate* impact on your life. I can take three baskets full of stinky smelly laundry, sort it all out, and put it in the machine. I take it out of the washing machine; I put it in the dryer. I take it out of the dryer. I fold it up. I take it to the various rooms and there I can see the fruit of my labor. The accomplishments of two or three hours worth of running up and down the stairs.

Another reason though that I really love my front loading washing machine is (and it is **my** front loading washing machine) that we get our water from a well. It is a relatively shallow well. We're not on city water. But, apparently, that was not a problem for the folks who lived in our house before us. All their children were grown. With the amount of laundry that we create in one week, and with doing several loads on more than one occasion, we have run out of water. I've had to call the well company and have them come out and prime our pump so that we can get water flowing again. Once was more than enough and it has been more than once. It's been, like, half a dozen times that I have had to do that.

So when we moved to Shepherdstown (where we live) we had a relatively new, only a few years old, top loading washing machine. But I could only do one load of laundry in a night. Then I was educated in the way of washing machines. And at the risk of sounding like a commercial, did you know that the average top loading washing machine uses between 40 and 50 gallons of water per load? Whereas, a front loading washing machine uses 15 gallons. Even though our washing machine was probably about eight years old, I went out and bought a front loading washing machine. Now I can do three - even four - loads of laundry in one night and still have water. I have to say I love my front loading washing machine.

Now, there may well be those of you who are saying ‘well, of course he loves it, because it is a gadget, it has all kinds of fun little buttons.’ I can program it to how fast the cycle will spin or I can even program it for a delayed start, so I can put a load in and it’ll run in the middle of the night or while I am at work. Because it’s a gadget and I’m a guy, of course I would love it, and I would have to very politely say, ‘well yes you’re right.’ If you go up to my office you are going to see all kinds of gadgets. You’re going to see a notebook computer, you’re going to see my little hand-held computer, you see right now the pager that I have and, of course, I have a cell phone and a satellite radio. As well, you’ll see several shelves filled with books, and my guitar and posters and prints hanging on the wall.

I don’t necessarily think that it is the gadget aspect, but rather that I **DO** have to be careful about getting caught up in the **stuff**. Because I am sure that each of us has things or people or activities in our life that are important to us, that mean something to us, that we love and enjoy and those with whom we want to spend time. And those are fine things. Those are part of what make us individuals; and cause us to be interesting to one another. All right, maybe a front loading washing machine doesn’t necessarily make me interesting, but hopefully you understanding where I am trying to go with this. All of us, I am sure, like to see the fruits of our labors. Things that we can *touch* and *see* and *feel* and *know*. Those are things that are important, I think, to us. Not the things that we don’t know or can’t see.

Now Paul was in Athens, Greece. I have never been there but I’ve heard it’s a really nice place. And in Paul’s day there was this place called the Areopagus. It was like a big amphitheater where people would gather to debate and discuss (We could say kind of like congress, but they actually got stuff done at the Areopagus). And Paul, if you look a few verses back from where we started tonight, you’ll find out that Paul is stressed out because, as he has been walking around Athens (now we have to remember Paul was raised in Tarsus which was part of Greece) but he had apparently never been to Athens before. As Paul is walking around Athens, he keeps seeing all of these idols and he has very much in the forefront of his mind that little reading from Exodus 20:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.

In other words: **Don’t Do Idols**. And what does Paul see all around him, but idols. So Paul, being Paul, and not being one who can allow the status quo to exist without confronting it, gets into a discussion. On this occasion, at least, (if you read throughout the Book of Acts, he does this many times and sometimes often times it gets him in trouble) but on this time, because the folks have asked him to get into this discussion, they get into a pretty good debate. He starts off saying that he has noticed in his walking around that he has found an altar with no idol on it but it has an inscription “to an unknown god.” The Athenians are playing it safe, they are hedging their bets, covering all bases, whatever metaphor you want to use here, they are trying to offer worship to both the known and the unknown. It’s kind of sneaky, but then again, when you are dealing with multiple deities, as the folks in Athens are, you can never be too safe.

So Paul says, ‘of course, you don’t know who this unknown god is, but I know who this is.’ And he goes on to witness to them as we heard tonight in our reading. And he lays out a fairly good argument, I think. Remember that the Athenians are great debaters, they love a good discussion and Paul can hold his own with these folks.

Now, of course, as many times often happens with our readings we only have part of a story, and you have to keep reading beyond what we heard tonight to find out that in the closing couple of verses of Chapter 17, we find out that while indeed there were those who scoffed at Paul, and said ‘this guy is full of garbage,’ there were a couple of other people and specifically name, there was a guy named Dionysius and another woman named Damaris, and many others who got up and followed Paul and became believers.

So what does Paul being in the Areopagus in the first century have to do with the front loading washing machine? We all have idols. They had idols in the first century in Athens. The idols were there to help the people get through their daily lives. They would get caught up in worship, but the gods in return were supposed to aid and assist them (whoever it was that was following that particular idol). Now, we have idols in our own lives today. Now those idols are probably not named Zeus, or Hera, or Hades or Athena. No, our idols are probably more likely named Sony or KitchenAid, maybe Apple or Kenmore. Maybe the idols in your life go by the names of Comcast Cable or on-line poker. Maybe your idols are more likely to be your kids’ athletic activities or your means of employment or the time you spend with your spouse or significant other. Now, most of those things are in and of themselves not bad, or wrong or harmful. Paul writes in his letter to Timothy about moderation in all things. But the point that I am attempting to make **here** is that we have a God whom we know. We have a God whom we know is important in our lives. We have that much over the Athenians. But like the Athenians, we too can get caught up; we can be tripped up by our modern idols. No matter how helpful that front loading washing machine might be in my life it is not the end all and the all for me.

We, as believers, are called by God. We are called by the waters of our baptism. We are called by the bread and wine that we have before us. We are called to serve that God, the God who was unknown to the people of first century Athens, but is known, and loved, and served, by us, today.

Amen.

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