

## COACH MCDONALD'S FIRE

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
The Sixth Sunday of Easter  
April 27, 2008

*So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus said: "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (from Acts 17)*

When I was 14 my family moved from New Jersey to South Dakota. For me this meant high school and then college in a big rectangular state on the Great Plains. In college I played on the baseball team under a driven coach who could never leave well enough alone. One year in March we were on a miserably long road trip through another big rectangular state known as Nebraska. On the morning we were supposed to begin our journey home, we learned that Coach McDonald had made a few phone calls in the night to arrange yet one more double header for us to play. The day dawned gray and cold, with temperatures not expected to reach 40 degrees. An icy, wet wind that could chill a buffalo to the bone swept across the field. The night before had rained and snowed, leaving the infield an impossibly muddy mess. Would Coach McDonald leave well enough alone and cancel the game? Not on your life.

When we arrived at the field not another human being could be found: no fans, no umpires, not even the other team. But Coach McDonald was sure they would come. What we needed to do was not shiver in the dugout and bemoan our fate, but make the field ready for the game. Coach McDonald knew just what to do. From the nearby groundskeeper's shed he produced some garden rakes and a large can of gasoline. All this he took to the muddiest part of the infield, where he began, strangely, pouring the gasoline onto the ground. Then, while the rest of us cursed the cold, Coach McDonald struck a match and lit the infield on fire. Let me repeat myself for dramatic effect: *He lit the infield on fire!* The scene was surreal. Coach McDonald stood amidst the flames, drying out the base paths by raking mud into the raging inferno that shot up all around him. All of us thought, but no one dared say, "Coach, how about letting this one go and calling it a day?" We knew he would do no such thing.

In the end, the other team never did show. All we could do was leave. But on the long drive home Coach McDonald explained how we could add two more victories to our record. "We were there and they weren't. That's a forfeit We win," he triumphantly declared. You see, Coach McDonald could never leave well enough alone.

Paul the Apostle was never one to leave well enough alone. At one point in his missionary travels Paul had a few free days to enjoy in the city of Athens while he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. What would he do? What would *you* do? Well, at first it appears that Paul played the tourist. He probably took in the Acropolis and other architectural wonders. But eventually something began to gall him. Everywhere he looked was a glorious temple to yet another god from the pantheon of Greek mythology. It was said in those days that Athens was so full of idols that it was easier to meet a god than it was a person. Today we look at the ruins of these temples as interesting examples of architecture and culture. But Paul saw them in full use, with people bowing down and offering sacrifices to statues, praying to gold, silver, and stone idols that they had fashioned with their own hands. Could Paul content himself with being a tourist, and respecting the foreign culture he was visiting? Could he admire the history and devotion that had inspired the works of art he was seeing? Could he let this one go and leave well enough alone? Not on your life.

The sight of all the idol worship provoked Paul to preach boldly of Jesus and the resurrection. In today's reading from Acts we have heard how such preaching landed him in the city's court, the Areopagus, where he was made to explain himself. In the time of Paul, the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, was a place as well as a council of city leaders. As you know, Athens was a city with a rich intellectual history, renowned for its contributions to philosophy, democracy, and the arts. Thus, to be on the council would have been a great honor awarded to an elite few. So Paul was facing a group of intellectuals and philosophers who lived in the world of ideas and were unlikely to believe that a visiting preacher off the public square had anything new under the sun to say. Paul would have to be careful in presenting his message. He would not insult the Areopagus, but neither would he walk away. He would find a way to light their field on fire. He began by complimenting them. He noted how religious they were; all the altars in the city proclaimed how hungry they were for God. He even referenced one altar in particular that had moved him. On it was an inscription that read: "To an unknown god."

Here, we might think, Paul should have left well enough alone. But he wouldn't; it simply wasn't in his constitution. What we have in Acts is probably just a portion or a digest of Paul's complete defense before the Areopagus. But in a nutshell he challenged the Athenians to take the next steps towards the one true God who wanted to be known. He might have said something like this: *Here you are; your brilliance in every field is celebrated throughout the world. Yet the best theological statement you can make is that God is unknown? Athenians, you've made a great start, but now it's time to rekindle some of your daring intellectual legacy. God wishes to be known. God has made himself known in Jesus. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." His name is Jesus.*

What do you think about Paul's message to the Athenian intelligentsia? Should he have just enjoyed the sights and kept his thoughts to himself? The climate today would suggest that Paul, indeed, should have left well enough alone. To challenge the spiritual complacency of another person – to say nothing of another culture – is the ultimate social mistake. It is to offend. It is to impose your faith unnaturally upon another. It is to risk being the religious equivalent of Coach McDonald. When religious people light fields on fire these days, the images that come to mind are not those of peace and goodwill. Rather, we envision religious conflict in the middle east, religious voting blocks in the Midwest, and mega-church pastors who crash and burn under the weight of their own hypocrisy. We fear the potential of religion to turn intolerant, and polarize people instead of drawing them together. Therefore religion – all religion – must be contained and managed.

I believe we also have a deeper fear of getting serious with God to the point of actually sharing our faith. We fear that God will disappoint us. We fear that God will be a no-show after all. We show up and shiver, we light the fire and make ready the field, and we wait. Where is God? Where is God when the innocent suffer, when children die, when the wicked prosper? Will God step in and make his presence known? If God doesn't, then even the little faith we may have will be dashed. Either we lose faith and face, or we add mythical victories to our record, trumping up stories of triumph that simply aren't true, and are bound to mislead later generations. Therefore – again – it's best to manage and contain religion. For heaven's sake, don't get carried away with it! Leave well enough alone is what our sophisticated, 21<sup>st</sup> century Manhattan culture would tell us.

Why then bother? Why listen to Paul and risk believing that God not only can be known but wants to be known? Why bother? We bother because the great promise of God is that he will not disappoint us. In the words of the prophet Isaiah (41:17): *When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.* We bother because our souls and bodies cry out for the

living God, and we dimly sense that we were made for a purpose, even to know and enjoy God forever. We yearn to play this game.

In this light I'm thinking of the New York Football Giants, and their final game of the regular season last year. Forgive me for another sports metaphor, but if you recall, with one game left to play the Giants were 10-5 and had already made the playoffs. The season finale on December 29 was against the undefeated New England Patriots. The question that the media repeatedly asked of the Giants was, why bother with this game? Why risk injuring the starters and putting the playoffs in jeopardy? Why bother? Tom Coughlin, the Giants' coach, declared that they would not leave well enough alone. They would play to win, with all their might. They would do all in their power to deny another team a perfect season. As you know, the Giants very nearly did upset the highly favored Patriots. But that final game, even though it was a loss, propelled them through the playoffs to face the Patriots again in the Super Bowl which, by the way, the Giants happened to win – in case you hadn't heard. Had the Giants not bothered with the seemingly inconsequential game, had they just left well enough alone, they never would have made it through the playoffs, to say nothing of winning the Super Bowl.

So why bother getting serious with God through all of life's apparently inconsequential moments? We bother because Paul struck a note of urgency in his message. The time is now; today could be the last game of the season. We don't have forever to respond to the God who wants to be known. God *has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed*. That man whom God has appointed – whose name is Jesus – speaks with the same urgency in today's Gospel reading from John (15:1-8): *I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit*. Our purpose is to bear fruit. Indeed, God himself presses us, and prunes us to bear more fruit. The fruit that Jesus refers to isn't grapes, by the way. It is love. It is to make a return on all the life and love that God has poured into us. It is to love with something of Coach McDonald's fire in response to God, who has first loved us and now challenges us to get off the bench and play the game.

For those of you who fear I may be a one-dimensional preacher with only sports analogies in my homiletical quiver, let me hazard a metaphor from the perilous tundra of human relationships, where people in love must look one another in the eye, talk about their feelings, and watch Jane Austen movies together. A few weeks ago I was waiting in the doctor's office, and the music overhead was an easy listening radio station. Suddenly, from out of the past came an old song by Willie Nelson called "You Were Always on My Mind." As I listened to the distinctive crooning of old Willie, it dawned on me that this is the song of a man who didn't bother in the inconsequential moments. Willie has clearly been given the boot by the significant woman in his life. She has had it with him. He has been indifferent to her love, and he admits it. He sings how he did not love her "*quite as often as I could have,*" and how he didn't treat her "*quite as good as I should have.*" He sometimes made her "*feel second best,*" and he didn't "*hold her all those lonely, lonely times.*" He goes on: "*Little things I should have said and done; I just never took the time. You were always on my mind. You were always on my mind.*" He left his love unknown, and only now, when the singer finds himself on the outside of love, is he sorry. He pleads for another chance: "*Tell me, tell me that your sweet love hasn't died. Give me, give me one more chance to keep you satisfied.*"

The apology seems too little, too late. But listeners are left with the impression that Willie feels misjudged. He is stunned that his indifference toward the woman has been taken for what it was: indifference. He is bewildered by how his coldness could possibly be interpreted as coldness. He is perplexed by how his refusal to return love could be seen as a refusal to return love. What's going on here? What do these women want? whines Willie, who sees himself as a

victim. But the truth is, Willie, or the man in the song, apparently gets exactly the judgment he deserves. Love that is “Always on my mind” but seldom shown in word and deed is never enough to keep the embers burning. Leaving well enough alone and hoping for the best didn’t cut it.

What Paul had to say to the Athenians was essentially the same message: Leaving well enough alone with God won’t work either. Erecting an altar to unknown god may be a great start, but it won’t satisfy in the end. What does God want? God wants some of Coach McDonald’s fire. God wants for us to know him, and in knowing him to love him, and in loving him to serve him, and in serving him to share in his life, so that we may abide in him and he in us forever.

+