

So we have an intriguing story this morning about Paul showing up in Athens at the Areopagus, a prominent place in Athens – a very large white rock hill. In ancient times, it was the supposed site where a number of Greek myths are situated. Later it was used as a place to try notorious criminals. In Paul's day, around the year 50 or so, it must have been a place where thoughtful men of Athens gathered to talk and debate. Paul stopped there on his second missionary journey. After Athens, he went on to Corinth and spent a year and a half there setting up a new congregation.

So why did Paul take the time to talk to Gentile intellectuals in Athens? It was probably an enjoyable stop to debate theology with smart people! So, when he has a chance to speak he starts his argument by complimenting the scholars of Athens, always a good way to start a speech. Then he proceeds to argue that what they call an altar to an unknown god is really an altar to THE GOD who made heaven and earth and everything in it.

It would be like today going to the steps of Widener Library at Harvard, or out on the benches outside Beineke Library at Yale. It's a gathering place of people who are studying to be well educated leaders in science, and letters. What if Paul, engaging today's scholars, talked about the gods of today. "I went about NYC and saw a sculpture of a bull," Paul might say to today's scholars. It's one of the city's now iconic symbol placed as it is on Whitehall St. at Broadway, a short distance from Wall St. We must be bullish about finances and investment the bull implies. Paul might continue, "It reminds me of the story of Aaron and the Golden Calf in the Torah. Is the bull and object of worship, or an idol to another god" the curious Paul would wonder?

The bull is not an unknown god, but it's pretty easy to see that the message of "Charging Bull" is that Wall Street needs to be bullish about finance and investment. He is an important symbol of the all-important financial district. Paul would be the first one to stand up and make an intelligent, logical argument for that.

Paul might use the bull to bring a different message to us. He would argue that we should be bullish about God's presence in our lives, and the need to have a strong, aggressive image of God who contends with us to knock over all the other gods and idols we erect in our lives: money, power, security, the need to be right.

And so the Athenians were confronted with this odd person, Paul, who spoke very wisely and convincingly through his discourse. Paul did win over a couple of converts as recorded a couple of verses later when Luke tells us, *"At that point Paul left them, but some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."* Acts 17:33-34

This morning we're blessed to have the Vakassian and Nelson families with us to celebrate the baptism of little Bentley Nelson Vakassian.

So we go from thinking about symbols of Athenian life, and American corporate financial life, to the symbols of our sacramental life in Christ.

The font is our sculpture to Life lived in Christ, and with Christ. It is the symbol of the primary place that Baptism holds in our Christian faith. If you were born before 1979 you may remember that baptismal fonts were most often found in the back of the church, or in a little alcove to the side of the churchout of the way, and out of sight for the most part.

Baptisms were most often private affairs with the priest or minister holding a little service before or after the main Sunday service, or at a parishioner's home. We didn't want to inconvenience other parishioners by having them sit through the prayers for baptism.

But with Vatican II in the RC church, and liturgical renewal in many Christian denominations, came the new understanding that this was one of the two most important sacraments of the Church. We shouldn't hide baptisms, but celebrate them. It is the sacrament that Jesus himself participated in at the Jordan River. It's a joy to celebrate this event with Bentley and his family. In it we are all asked to take care of each other; young and old, new Christians, returning Christians, and been-here-forever-Christians.

At least four things are going on in this sacrament of baptism; we are welcomed into the community of Christians, we are forgiven our sins and made a new person by being washed with water and anointed with oil, we symbolically die with Christ and are raised with Christ in water that is dangerous, refreshing, and absolutely imperative to life, and lastly, we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us all our lives.

The Holy Spirit, traditionally symbolized by a dove, as the dove descended upon Jesus at the time of his baptism. This morning we hear the Spirit called something very different in the Gospel reading from John this morning.

This morning's Gospel reading from John gives us an image of Jesus talking to his disciples in farewell. He is going to his father and our Father. He gives his disciples the assurance that they will not be without God's ever-present love. He will send another Advocate, which is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. An advocate stands up for us, contends with enemies for us, guides us and supports us. So it is with the Holy Spirit who gives us confidence, strength, and fearlessness.

Fearless girl now sits directly in front of Charging Bull on that corner in NYC where thousands of tourists snap pictures of the iconic pair of sculptures.

I hope that Bentley will be a fearless boy as he grows up; fearless in his joy, in his desire to learn and love and play, fearless in the face of bullies who threaten him, or his friends. He too, just like us, will have the Spirit of Truth within him. I pray that Bentley will be fearless in his knowledge that he is a beloved child of God, and that his Advocate, the Holy Spirit always has his back no matter where he goes or what he does.

Just like you and me.