



Table Talk NL

By Rev. Timothy J. Swenson • ILT Dean of Chapel



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The Fifth Sunday of Easter | May 3, 2026

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THE NARRATIVE LECTIONARY - NL443

**ACTS 17:16-31
(JOHN 1:16-18)**

**Sermon at Athens: “What you worship as unknown,
I proclaim to you.”**

The city of Athens provokes Paul’s spirit. The city is “full of idols” (v. 16 ESV). Paul gets a new title: “babblers.” Epicureans and Stoics drag this “babblers” to the Areopagus. There Paul proclaims the “unknown god” whom they ignorantly worship, the Creator who needs nothing from human hands, the One who now commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day to judge the world by the man he raised from the dead (vv. 22-31). From the perspective of Paul—shaped by the theology of the cross and the unconditional gospel that kills and makes alive—this text is no exercise in accommodating natural theology. The text is the hammer of God smashing every religious project, including the philosophers’ quest for wisdom.

Luther’s three rules for the theologian shape our reading of the text. First, oratio. We begin on our knees, despairing of our own insight. “Grant us your Holy Spirit,” we pray, “lest we turn this text into another Athenian altar.” Only the Spirit can prevent us from domesticating Paul’s scandal. The same Spirit who provoked Paul’s

“...but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” (Acts 17:30)

spirit over the plenitude of Athenian idols must now provoke our spirit over the plenitude of our own idols. Without prayer, the text remains mere history; with prayer, we hear in it the living voice of the crucified God who refuses to be captured by our systems.

Second, meditatio. We linger over the words—reading them, speaking them, hearing them—until they chew on us. We linger until we no longer seek to understand them but come to stand under them and their authority over us. Paul does not praise Athenian religiosity; he exposes it as ignorance (v. 30). The altar “to an unknown god” is the perfect religious hedge—pious, open-minded, and utterly safe. You can hear here the same critique Luther leveled at every theologia gloriae: the attempt to climb to God by reason, culture, or

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>> morality. Paul quotes their poets (“in him we live and move and have our being,” v. 28) only to yank the rug out from beneath their feet. Even their best insight leaves them with hands full of idols. The true God is not “near” in the sense of philosophical proximity; he is near in the scandal of a risen Jew—that is, the scandal of Jesus Christ crucified. The speech builds to its crescendo not in vague spirituality but in the command and promise of the Word of God: repent, because the crucified-and-raised One will judge. Here, law and gospel collide. The law is universal (“all people everywhere”), absolute, and lethal to every self-justifying project. The gospel is equally universal and equally lethal to the old Adam: God has already acted in Jesus. The resurrection is not proof of some general truth, but the old creation’s invasion by the new creation, bestowed now by faith in the person of Jesus Christ.

Third, tentatio. As you have come to stand under the authority of the text, the Word of God now assaults you. Modern Athens is everywhere—marketplaces of ideas, podcasts of self-help spirituality, churches that peddle “unknown gods” of relevance or therapeutic deism. The devil whispers to you that Paul’s message is too narrow, too offensive, too “Lutheran.” Anfechtung strikes: Can this Good News really be for me? Am I not too educated, too progressive, too broken? Precisely here, where the Word of God stands over you... Here, the Word proves its power. The same Spirit who provoked Paul now provokes you until

you taste the sweetness of the gospel amid the bitterness of repentance. Tentatio drives us back to oratio and meditatio until we discover, as Luther said, “how right, how true, how sweet” the Word of God is and moves.

Jesus Christ is for you. Not for the religious, not for the philosophers, not for the spiritually curious, but for you—the idol-maker, the skeptic, the one whose best wisdom still leaves an altar to the unknown god. The man God raised is the man who died under the world’s verdict, so that your verdict has already been spoken: guilty but pardoned. In this man... In this person, Jesus Christ... The Creator who needs nothing from you gives you everything—life, breath, forgiveness, future. Repent and believe this good news. The unknown God has a name... a face... and wounds... for you.

Table Talk: Discuss how these three rules have worked upon you—Oratio (Prayer), Meditatio (Word), and Tentatio (Struggle)—to form you as a Christian.

Pray: Heavenly Father, so drive your Word deep into my heart that I come to stand under the authority of your Word and only then will I understand it. For Jesus’ sake. Amen



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