

“Paul in Athens”
Acts 17:16-35
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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This morning we continue to follow the story of the early church as it unfolds in the book of Acts, and we are picking up where we left off in chapter 17. Remember, after being thrown into jail in Philippi, Paul and Silas face a mob of thugs in Thessalonica, and when they escape to a nearby town the mob follows them. The opponents to the gospel accuse the early Christians of “turning the world upside down” (17.6) and last Sunday we explored how God still invites us to turn our world upside down - we are to live by a different set of values, to be conformed not to the world and its standards of success but to follow in the Way of Jesus - the way of love and service and hospitality to all. Because the mob from Thessalonica follow Paul and Silas to a neighboring city, there is concern for their safety - and so Paul the main leader is sent far away to Athens, with hopes that his side kicks Silas and Timothy will join him soon (17.15). Let’s pick up the story as we turn to verse 16 and following, the story of Paul’s famous visit to the city of Athens.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babblers want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Out of all of the speeches in the book of Acts, this scene of Paul in Athens - preaching to the intellectuals and philosophers of the day - this one ranks as one of the most important in the entire

book. Bible scholars have ranked it so high not because it contains some new message we have not heard before from Paul, but rather it has to do with where it is preached. ([New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 10, Robert Wall, p.243](#)). Location, location, location! Athens was a great university town known for its intellectual culture going back for centuries - it's the place where Socrates and Plato and others lived and taught, a place comparable to today's Harvard Square or the universities in Oxford, England. And so it is in this setting, among the world's elite intellectuals, that Paul comes to bring the gospel.

Growing up I remember the time Billy Graham the great evangelist came to Columbia, SC, and how people traveled from near and far to hear him. But when it comes to great preachers in the book of Acts, this is not how it worked. People did not travel to hear them - instead, they came to the people. In his reflection on this passage Bible scholar Matt Skinner says this: "Only rarely in Acts do people travel to hear the gospel message. For the most part, the message about Jesus Christ comes to them, borne by messengers..." like Paul. Skinner goes on to make the point that the power of the gospel is to "*meet people where they are - in their settings, usually with language or concepts that make sense to their particular circumstances.*" The gospel is about the good news of God's willingness to come close to us, "to meet us in our own flesh" ([Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts](#); Skinner, p. 123).

So let's take a closer look at how exactly the gospel lands "in the flesh" here in Athens. In the opening verse we are told that when Paul enters Athens he is deeply distressed to find that the city is flooded with idols. Often valued as great pieces of art (NIB, p. 244) the idols trigger a deep emotional response in Paul. As a good Jew, Paul knows that the wooden and stone statues are worthless things in comparison to the living God (14.15), the very One who has created all things. This deep response leads Paul to engage with the Jewish community gathered in the synagogue as well as with folks in the marketplace. And some of these are no ordinary folks, but rather members of the intellectually elite, distinguished philosophers - the Epicureans and the Stoics.

What is amazing to me is that Paul, who has come to Athens fleeing persecution, takes this positive approach with the elite of Athens. *Instead of going on the offensive attacking his potential adversaries who call him a babbler, Paul engages in an honest exchange with his peers.* Though some translations say Paul argued with the philosophers, the Greek word used here carries more of a sense of a collegial and friendly exchange. In many ways Paul takes on the role similar to that of the Greek philosopher Socrates who loved to ask questions and have conversation.

Next, we are told that when the philosophers do not grasp the message Paul is preaching, they decide to take him to the outdoor city assembly called the Areopagus. It is here that Paul delivers his sermon, the only sermon in all of Acts directed completely to non-believers. Areopagus literally means "Mars Hill" referring to an open area just west of the Acropolis, right in the heart of the city. Though it might be more dramatic to envision an adversarial situation, the questions Paul is asked on Mars Hill seem friendly and honest: "What is this new teaching? Can we learn what you are talking about? You've told us some strange things and we want to know what they mean."

And so Paul responds by addressing his audience in a very positive manner. "People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way." You see, though Paul is distressed about their worship of idols, he does not start with words of condemnation. He simply makes the observation that he has seen their gods around town, and then he points out one altar in particular, the one with this inscription: "To an unknown God." Paul goes on to say from his perspective the unknown god is actually known - "for there is one God who is the creator, the Lord of heaven and earth" Instead of

quoting scripture from his tradition as a Jew, he uses ideas that resonate with both the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. For example, though we don't know its exact origin, the phrase that God is the one "in whom we live and move and have our very being" comes not from the Bible but from ancient Greek poetry (NIB, p. 244). And nowhere in his sermon does he even use the word Jesus.

So as we can see, as a preacher Paul is very aware of his audience - and so he puts his main theological points in a language that appeals to the intellectual non-believers of Athens. He meets people where they are, and though much of what Paul says in his sermon the Greek intellectuals could accept, he doesn't just stop there. By the end of his speech Paul is bold enough to say that while God has overlooked the ignorance of things in times past, the time has come for everyone everywhere to repent - to change their hearts and change their lives. God has set a day when the world will be judged by a righteous man God has appointed. And how do we know this? It's because God has given us the proof by raising Jesus from the dead (17.30-31). This call to repentance is the call to turn away from our old ways of living, including the temptation to worship other things besides the true God. This call to repentance is something you must accept by faith. And as is the case throughout Acts, we see that people respond to the gospel's call in various ways. As Paul left the gathering on Mars Hill some began to ridicule Paul, others said "We would like to hear more from you again" while others joined him and became believers.

So what might this sermon of Paul teach us today as disciples of the Risen Christ? I believe that the pattern set forth by Paul can be very helpful in our relationship with the increasingly secular world in which we live. And in case you have not noticed, our culture no longer revolves around the Christian faith and the Church as it has in previous generations. In a recent [Pew Research poll](#) on religious life in America, it's clear that Christianity is on a steady decline. A 2019 survey revealed that though 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians, this is down 12 percentage points over the past decade. And people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009. *Let that sink in - one in four adults no longer have any religious belief. And church attendance for those who do claim religious affiliation is down across the board, too, and we all know that the pandemic has not helped that at all.*

While there are multitudes of books and blogs written to explain this shift in our culture, I want us to stay focused for a few minutes more on our text for this morning. *What Paul teaches us is that even in a foreign land we should not see ourselves as standing in opposition to those who do not share our faith commitments. Instead, we should look for overlaps in our faith - we should look for common ground with people who may even reject the basic elements of our Christian faith.*

Several years ago I talked with a young woman about the people who are unaffiliated from any form of religion, the so-called "Nones" who check the "nothing in particular" box. This group includes many people who simply prefer to spend Sunday mornings in a coffee shop or at home or on the golf course - anywhere but being here in church. She told me that what a lot of these folks are looking for is community, a sense of belonging. And while they may talk negatively about the church, or react against a form of Christianity that is overly judgmental or rigid, they are still searching for truth and integrity. They are looking for authentic community, a place where they can be accepted and a place they can belong.

So, how might we engage with people who seem to have no need for church? How can we talk with those who prefer to stay away from any form of organized religion? Or those who claim to be "spiritual but not religious"? One simple way is to open up a dialogue, sharing with your friend or co-worker, your family member or classmate what it is you value about your church family and how

your faith supports you in your day to day life. And you can also listen to where they are coming from - listening not to change their minds about anything but really listening to their hearts. What needs do they have? In what ways do you have similar needs? Taking the risk to speak and listen is the first step.

I believe a deep hunger in our fast paced digital culture is the need for community, the need to be seen and known and loved. We are blessed that our church family is a healthy place where connections are made across the generations, a community that is not perfect but one that is committed to welcome and care for one another. But I wonder how comfortable we are in actively engaging people in conversations about our faith? Are we able to follow the pattern set by Paul to meet people where they are and also to share in our own words the good news of our faith, that we are by grace God's Beloved Children, that despite all the modern idols that tempt us to place our loyalty in other things besides the living God, we have come to trust in the Risen Lord who is the Lord and Savior of all? Are we able to tell the story of our faith not only through our acts of love and justice and mercy, but also through our spoken testimony?

One of the things that attracted me to the Presbyterian faith is that we believe in letting God be God, that it's not in our job description to try and save everyone through our words and our witness. Instead, we are taught to believe in the sovereignty of God - a God who is in charge of all things and who takes the initiative in our relationship. I love that we can let our good works speak for themselves, and that we are not responsible for saving the world - that's God's job! But I wonder how prepared we are to talk about our faith when the opportunity arises? Whether it's at school, the workplace, or the grocery store, how ready are we as people of faith to give a witness? If someone asks us about our involvement at church, are we able to talk about our faith in ways that can connect with them? Are we willing to invite them to church or a special event like the upcoming Animal Blessing? If we tell someone we are going to youth group or Sunday School, are we able to talk about why this is important? My hunch is that we are better at practicing our faith than talking about it, but to be faithful I believe we need to be able to do both.

The apostle Paul was able to connect with the Athenian intellectuals of his day because he was grounded in his faith. He had a personal relationship with the risen Christ, and so he was able to give his testimony. To be confident enough to engage in faith conversations with people who may not be religious, I believe we need to be better grounded in the scriptures, in our traditions, in our practices of faith. I am grateful that we have a deep commitment to Sunday School, VBS and our youth groups. But Christian formation is not something that just happens here at church - it really is something that must be nurtured 7 days a week, 52 weeks out of the year - you see, growing in faith really is a life-long journey.

Witnessing to our faith never has to be about repeating ideas and beliefs that we think are important for people to know. Instead, Witnessing to our faith is more about giving testimony to how God is active and moving in our lives - in the highs and in the lows - how we have experienced the love of Christ sustaining us in all the moments of life. As people of faith here at First Presbyterian I believe we have the incredible opportunity and challenge to share our faith with a world that is hungry for truth and love, integrity and community. The mission field is not somewhere far off, it is right here and right now in our daily lives. May we find the courage as Paul did to speak the truth in love, sharing the joy of the gospel not only with our actions but also with our hearts and yes with our voices. This indeed is a joyful task we are called to do together!

All praise be to God now and forever, Amen.