

The Church in Action sermon series
Looking Everywhere But Up - Acts 17:16-34
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I still vividly remember the toughest audience I ever had as a pastor. No, it's not you all, you're the nicest. Please remember I said that if you don't like this sermon. While I was in seminary, a friend asked if I would come speak to a group of people who were apathetic to the idea of religion, sometimes to the point of hostility. I was filled with the invincibility and arrogance of an untested seminary student, so of course I agreed to take on this challenge. I'm sure I could sway this group to be filled with Holy Spirit and start speaking in tongues. And who was my audience? The local gathering of the Cynical Atheists Association? The Indianapolis chapter of the Satan Lovers' Society? Worse. It was a group of high school freshmen.

I knew I was in trouble when the first question was, "What does the Bible mean by, 'Be fruitful and multiply'?" To quote Admiral Akbar in "Star Wars," "It's a trap!" How do you explain what the Bible means by that without giving the group permission to do it? The questions only got more difficult from there. I remember trying to straddle the line between being true to my faith while still speaking the language of the people to whom I was talking without sounding like a total dork. That's the same line Paul is walking today in our scripture.

We're finishing up our summer journey through the book of Acts, as we've watched the disciples grow in confidence as they preach the gospel after Jesus's resurrection. They're joined by Paul, who is converted to faith in Jesus and becomes a zealous evangelist for the movement. Although we're stopping at chapter 17, there is a lot more to the book of Acts that I didn't feel was appropriate for Sunday morning, things like floggings and shipwrecks and contentious committee meetings.

In our story today, after starting a few new churches, Paul winds up in Athens. He has some time to kill while he waits on his buddies Silas and Timothy to catch up, so decides to soak in some of the local culture. Athens was a cosmopolitan city, the center of Greco-Roman culture and intellectual sophistication. This was the home of Aristotle and Plato. This was the location of the Parthenon and numerous other temples and hundreds of statues. It was like the Las Vegas of the ancient world, promoting all kinds of worldly pleasures and secular values. Not quite fertile soil for the gospel to be fruitful and multiply.

While walking the Athenian streets, Paul becomes "deeply distressed" by all the idols he saw around him because they violated his Jewish sensibilities. After all, the first two commandments say "Thou shalt worship no other gods before me," and "Thou shalt not bow down to graven images," and both were being broken in plain sight. So, Paul is faced with quite a conundrum. What do you do when you are immersed in a culture that goes against your beliefs?

Paul has a couple choices. He can just deal with it, not make a fuss, keep his head down and his mouth shut. Ha! If you know Paul at all, that's not quite his MO. He can also put up a billboard outside the Parthenon that said, "You're going to Hell...unless you follow Jesus!" But this is Athens, not an interstate in Ohio, so vaguely threatening religious billboards may not be as effective. So, Paul chooses the middle road by engaging the local residents in conversation. Acts tells us that Paul goes the agora, the Greek marketplace which served as the social hub, and strikes up a conversation with some of the local philosophers about their religion.

Not everyone is impressed with what Paul had to say. Some of the crowd called Paul a “babblers,” which started a centuries-long tradition of preachers being accused of that. But his persistence and his persuasiveness got Paul a hearing at the Aeropagus, which was like the city council of Athens.

Paul proceeds to give one of the best examples of a persuasive speech I’ve ever seen. I taught Public Speaking for several years, and Paul hits all the checkpoints that make for a good persuasive speech. He establishes common ground, complimenting the Greek for their visible commitment to religion. This is a great way to get an audience on your side. I saw a comedian recently and his first five minutes of material was about traffic in Lexington. “You have red Xs and green arrows and roads that change names three times. What’s up with that?” And every one of us was nodding in agreement. Building common ground is a great way to get someone to listen to you.

Paul also brings in the local culture by referencing the Statue to an Unknown God. The prevailing belief in pagan religions was if you didn’t properly honor a god, that god might punish you for the lack of tribute. So, there were statues to Zeus and Athena and Apollo and Ares. And, just in case they forgot someone, the Athenians also built a statue to “The Unknown God,” so if some deity got his feelings hurt, they could say, “Hey, this one is for you! We just couldn’t remember how to spell your name.”

Paul also taps into the logic of the Athenians by appealing to their knowledge of creation and belief in the natural power of the divine. Instead of citing Hebrew scripture to them, which would have been completely lost on this non-Jewish crowd, he quotes Greek poets to make his point. He then says that the true God is bigger than any human-made statue and then closes the sale by saying he says he knows who this unknown God is...the answer is Jesus. Bam! That’s an A+ persuasive speech right there.

Was he successful in persuading his audience? Not entirely. Ok, maybe a B+ persuasive speech. We’re told some people scoffed. A few people were converted. And some said, “We will hear you again about this.” When you consider the circumstances in which Paul was preaching and the simmering hostility toward his views, a hostility that would only be rivaled by a classroom full of high school freshmen, I’d say Paul did a pretty good job. “We will hear you again about this” is sometimes the best response we can hope for.

An interesting thing to note is that when Paul ventured into the foreign territory of the Greco-Roman culture, he found they were looking for the same thing the Jews were looking for in the synagogue. Their impulse to worship something bigger than themselves was right even if the objects of their worship were wrong. Paul says that God made it so people would search for God, even grope about before they find God. I love the image of people groping for God. There’s a sense of urgency there, as if looking for a light switch in a dark room. The Jews, the Jesus followers, the Greeks – they were all groping for God.

This pursuit has gone on for centuries. Around the year 400, St. Augustine wrote in his book Confessions, “You have made yourself for us, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Since time began, we’ve been searching for the unknown God. And we’re still looking. It’s like we have this God-shaped hole inside of us that can only be filled by one thing. Today, people have all kinds of things at their disposal that they use to fill the God-shaped hole inside of them, but no matter how much materialism or alcohol or Tik Tok or busyness you pour into it, it cannot be filled. They’re looking everywhere but up, but that hole can only be filled by knowing God. Paul says to the Athenians that he knows this unknown God, he knows the one

thing that can fill the God-shaped hole within us. That's the same message we need to hear and share today. The hope and meaning people are groping for...we believe the answer is Jesus.

Most of us are very much like Paul. We are believers in a world that doesn't believe, or at least doesn't believe in a way shines God's light and offers God's inclusive love. So, our job, then, is to introduce people to this God for whom they are searching. But we can't do that in our own language. Crusades and street-corner sermons don't work anymore. I was at Pride Fest one year when it was still downtown, and there was a guy with a megaphone and a hand-written sign telling everyone why they were going to Hell and needed to repent. Want to guess how many converts he made? In order to shine Jesus' light in this world, we have to speak the world's language, and that language is not judgment and condemnation, but God's love and acceptance.

That's one of the beautiful things about our Vacation Bible School this year. Missy said that about 40% of the kids who attended don't go to Crestwood. They go to other churches, or more likely, don't go to church at all. And we had the opportunity to welcome their kids in, to love on them, to play games with them and do crafts with them, to shine Jesus' light on them. And we've already started seeing them again in worship. "We will hear you again about this."

In order for the Bible to be a living book, the gospel should sound different every place it's shared. That doesn't mean the message changes, but the delivery must be enfolded in a way that speaks to the culture and the people immersed in it. Whether it's through a post, a text, or a face-to-face conversation, we have good news to share! As Paul tells the Athenians, the Unknown God they've been groping for is not far from each one of them. We can go into the stores, the little league fields, the fitness centers, the coffee shops around us and show through our words and actions that we know this God, and that has made a difference in our lives. We do that because people are watching us to see if all this religion stuff really makes a difference. Yes, they are looking for excellent Vacation Bible Schools and welcoming fellowship events and engaging worship services, but what they are really groping for is meaning, purpose, a reason to believe God is real in a world that seems to show otherwise. Do we live in such a way that people want to know more about the hope and joy and peace we show?

Christians often get a bad rap for being simplistic, anti-science, superstitious, exclusionary. Many people grew up in churches like this, and because of that they have no interest in stepping foot in here. The church comes across as threatened and threatening. But that's not who we are. So, do we sit here and wait for them to come running back to us? Or do we go after them, into the cultural marketplaces and the virtual spaces to let them know God is just as present with them there as God is with us here? St. Francis said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words." So, let's go out and preach the good news we know. Granted, some may scoff at us. Some may call us "babblers" or worse. But some will say, "We will hear you again about this." If we can do that, I trust God will take it from there.