

Narrative Lectionary: Paul's Witness in Athens
May 13, 2018

The Pew Research Center does a great job of keeping track of the religious landscape in all of the United States. Here are some statistics in Oregon from 2015. People self-report their religious affiliation this way: Christian: 61%- Evangelical Protestant: 29%, Mainline: 13%, Historically Black: 1%, Catholic: 12%, Mormon: 4%

How about the non-Christian religions? Non-Christian Religions: 7%, Jewish 1%, Muslim 1%, Buddhist <1%, Hindu <1%, Non-affiliated: 31%, Atheists 5%, Agnostics 8%. That non-affiliated number is the group that is really growing in Oregon. They call this the None-Zone. When a pollster asks somebody what church they belong to, more and more people say, None. And now there are people who say, I'm Done. I'm done with the church. I got hurt, I got excluded, I got burned out, I'm done.

The pollsters ask how often people attend a worship service. Here's what people self-reported: Attend worship weekly- 29%; Once/twice a month to a few times a year- 33%; Seldom/never- 37%

I wanted to show you these statistics about life in Oregon because I want you to see the landscape here. What does it mean to share our faith where most people say they believe in God, but many are either saying I'm done with the church, or I just don't need the church. And what does it mean to share our faith with those who already have a religion?

This sermon that Paul gives in Athens in our reading today is unlike any other sermon in the Book of Acts, because Athens was like no other place in the Book of Acts. It was a sophisticated place, or at least it thought it was. This is Paul going to Harvard, or Oxford. And these are people who don't know anything about Jesus, or Jewish history, or the Mosaic Law. They only know their gods, their stories, so Paul needs to figure out a link to where they are in their search for spirituality. Remember Paul has had a conversion experience on the road to Damascus. He has met the risen Lord. And the Spirit has said to him, Go share this news of God breaking into this world in Jesus of Nazareth.

Let me set this passage up for you. Paul is on his second missionary journey, and he's going through Greece. In Thessalonica and Berea before this, he

meets with Jews at the synagogue, and argues with them based on the Hebrew Scriptures, that Jesus is the Messiah they have been waiting for.

At this point Paul goes on ahead to Athens, about 200 miles away by ship, and sends Silas and Timothy to go back to the towns where they had preached to check on the new Christians there. He's waiting for them to join him in Athens.

And as he is waiting, he wanders through town. I think there's some wisdom here. We need to know the cultures around us. When God tells Jonah to preach to people who are very unlike him in the city of Ninevah, he doesn't want to, because he hates the Ninevites. So God says, I want you to travel three days into the city before you start preaching. I want you to smell their cooking, and watch their kids play, and listen to their music, and learn to love them as people created in God's image. Jonah needed to experience the culture.

So as Paul is waiting for his friends to arrive, he doesn't just hang out in his hotel room. He wanders around the city. Luke says Paul was distressed that the city was so full of idols. If we are going to witness to our faith, we first need to have our eyes and ears open. We need to pay attention to the beliefs of the people around us. Everybody has a belief system, even if they don't claim to have a faith. What do they base their life on? What would they go to the wall for? Paul wanders through the city, and notices that they are spiritual people. He disagrees with where they place their faith, in these idols made of wood and stone, but he pays attention to it. It's ok to disagree with people about all kinds of things. But before we do, we want to be sure we respectfully listen and discover what's behind their belief system. We have a shortage of listening in our nation right now.

Paul goes to the synagogue, and argues with the Jews about Jesus as the Messiah, and then he goes to the marketplace, and talks about Jesus with anybody who will listen. That sounds like it might not work very well these days, right? But on the streets of Athens, people hadn't heard anything about Jesus, and they were eager to hear new ideas. There were some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the crowd, and they debated with Paul. Epicureans believed that everything happened by chance, and that there were gods, but they didn't really care about the world. They believed that death was the end of things.

The Stoics believed that everything was God, and that everything that happened was the will of God. Everything was fated. They believed that every so many years the world went up in fire, and then started all over again with the same story. So the Epicureans and the Stoics say to Paul, Let's take you to the Areopagus, which translated means Mars Hill. The Areopagus was either a city council or the hill where the city council met, west of the Acropolis. These Greeks want to know more about this Jesus and the resurrection. They bring him to the leaders of the city.

Luke says in v. 22: "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.'"

There is a story behind that altar to an unknown god. Six centuries before this, a terrible plague had killed a number of people in Athens. And the people kept sacrificing to their gods, but nothing changed. The leaders of Athens asked a philosopher named Epimenides of Crete what to do. He said the only thing that would help would be to make altars to the ultimate god, the Supreme Creator, and to offer animal sacrifices there. That's what they did, and the plague went away immediately. So Greece had a number of altars to the unknown god, and this is probably what Paul had seen in his tour around the city.

That was the bridge that Paul used to connect with these folks. I think there are a lot of people who believe in unknown gods. Some people don't like what they've heard about the God we know in Jesus. Maybe they've had a bad experience of the church. The God they know about is an angry God, or a punishing God, or a God who wants to take all the fun out of life, so they're not going to believe in that God. So they come up with their own god, a god more to their liking. "God just wants me to be nice. God wants me to be happy. God wants me to be safe." I'll believe in that god. Some people would rather believe in that unknown god.

But Paul uses this as a bridge. He says, You've even got an altar with the inscription, 'to an unknown god.' I believe I know who that God is. What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you! Paul finds a bridge to these people who are searching for something. They are religious already! Paul says, Let me share my understanding of who that unknown God is.

Let me share with you a German word that sounds formidable, but when you break it down it makes sense. The word is *Anknüpfungspunkt*, which means the point of contact, or the connecting factor. It's the place where the button goes in the buttonhole. If the Gospel is a beautiful button, and everybody's life experience is a buttonhole, the *Anknüpfungspunkt* is where the Gospel fits perfectly the life experience of each of us.

I grew up thinking I had to do something to get God to love me, and I even needed God to stop being angry with me. And the place where the Gospel fit into my buttonhole was when I realized that God loved me the way I am, and I can't do anything to earn that love. The button of the Gospel fit perfectly in that buttonhole of mine, and my whole world was changed.

Paul finds the buttonhole for the Athenians. He says, I know who this unknown God is!

He continues in v.24: "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." The Epicureans and Stoics could agree with this. They didn't believe in idols either. He says, Let me start with some things we agree about.

Then he says: "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." And then Paul quotes from some of the Greek poets: "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.'"

Notice that he uses examples from their own poets. It's one reason I like to use stories from movies, and books, and songs that people hear on the radio. I have a couple of wedding sermons based on movie quotes about love, because people know those stories, and they remember the quotes, and it helps me tell the Gospel story with familiar images to them.

And when we are sharing with people of other faiths, it's helpful to find the places of commonality with them. What do we share in common? There was a Christian speaker who was speaking to a group of international students on

a retreat around Christmas time; they couldn't go home on Winter break. A number of them were Nigerian Muslims, and when he began one night to share the Christmas story with them, he could see them in the back, and their body language was saying, This isn't for us, this Christian story.

Later that night he got out a copy of the Koran, and he found the part in the Koran where Jesus is talked about. And Muslims do believe that Jesus was a prophet from God, they just don't believe he was the Son of God. But it says in the Koran that Jesus is the Word of God. And so the speaker the next night said, As it says in your sacred word, the Koran, Jesus was the Word of God, and that's what the Gospel writer says in John chapter 1, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,' and then they began to understand how Christians thought of Jesus. It helped for them to hear it connected to a text that they valued.

Paul continues on in v. 29: "Since we are God's offspring (notice he finds the commonality there: we are all 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." Now Paul starts to share his own beliefs. The Epicureans and Stoics didn't believe in the idols, but there were people in the crowd who did. He doesn't just say, You believe what you believe, and I'll believe what I believe. He makes an argument for his beliefs, that he doesn't believe God can be represented by these idols.

Notice he doesn't say, Well, that's truth to you and this is truth to me. And let's just let it be. He's willing to disagree with their theological perspective. Some people say that all religions really are saying the same thing, or we're all trying to get to the same God, or the same place. There are some commonalities in many of the religions of the world, and we need to claim them, and agree where we can, and work together where we can.

But how religions understand God can be very different. The Western religions believe that you live one life, and then there is an afterlife of some sort. The Indian religions believe in reincarnation. Both can't be true. Christianity claims that its founder was intimately connected with God, in fact, *was* the Son of God. The Muslims and the Jews say, Absolutely not. Muslims say to Christians, You talk as if you have three gods, and we say, No, we believe in one God in three persons. Hindus believe in many gods. Belief in many gods and in one God can't both be true. We have differences, and it's good to respectfully discuss those differences, to state our beliefs,

and to listen to other people's beliefs. So Paul doesn't leave the conversation just talking about the similarities; he begins to talk about where his beliefs differ from the Athenians. Respect for other people doesn't mean we can't disagree with them.

But Paul doesn't end his sermon there. He says there is a *response* we need to make to God. God now requires a decision. V. 30: "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."

Paul says, My belief is that we will not continue to live on and on, but there will come a day of judgment, and this man Jesus, whom I spoke about earlier, will be the One to judge each of us. This Jesus is the One raised from the dead. And maybe Paul said, I met him in a vision on the road to Damascus.

Remember Epicureans didn't believe God got involved in a personal way? Paul says, Let me tell you a story of God actively involved in somebody named Jesus, a God who is involved in my life.

What was the response? Some people scoffed at him, because they didn't believe resurrection could happen. Some people said, Let's come later and talk about this. And a few people believed. Those are three common choices right? Some people scoff, some people say I'll get back to you. And a few people believe and join the community. Our job is not to get people to believe, but simply to share our story of the God we know in Jesus, to listen to people around us, and to try to fit the beautiful button of the Gospel into the buttonhole of people's experience.

The ELCA has a draft *Declaration on Inter-religious Commitment* that we will be voting on in 2019. In this declaration, we say four things about how to relate to our neighbors of other faiths. 1. Love our neighbor of another religion. When Jesus tells a story about a Jewish man beaten up on the road, it's a man of another religion who helps out, a Samaritan. Jesus says, Everything's included under two commandments: Love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself, including your neighbor of another religion, or no faith at all.

2. Serve our neighbor of another religion, and that means serve with our neighbor of another faith for the good of the community.
3. Live in solidarity with our neighbor. That means when a group of folks is being targeted for their belief system, we need to have the courage to step in and stand in solidarity with them.
4. Witness to our neighbor. With people of other faiths and with people of no faith, we share our faith in the God we know in Jesus Christ without apology. We share it with our lives and yes, we share it with our words. We share that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and we let God be the judge. We can uphold God's story that we know in the Scriptures; we can uphold our Lutheran theology of grace by faith. And we can listen to our neighbor's story of faith, and hear his or her deepest convictions, and we can leave the results of the dialogue up to God.

In these relationships with people of other faiths or no faith at all, we will meet God.

Recently I met with a man in his mid-thirties who has gone through a very difficult life experience. He's not a member of any church. He works at a school with youth who are troubled. He was raised in the church, but he said to me that he is skeptical of churches because they say that they are right and everybody else is wrong.

He told me that he believes a church ought to be a group of people who care for each other and who care for the world. That's not a bad definition, is it? And he finds that in a group of friends. They care for each other, and they care for the world together. And I said to him: The kingdom of God is working among you and in you. I don't need you to join my church. But I would love to help expand the reign of God with you. God is at work in what you are doing to meet the needs of Oregon City teenagers, and I want us to be a part of that. This man and I have some differences in how we perceive God, but I shared my understanding with him, and he was a witness to me. And God met us in that conversation. Amen.