

Acts 17:16-34
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
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All God's Offspring

In Athens, Paul was troubled by the abundance of idols in the city. He engaged in debates in the synagogue and the marketplace daily, including discussions with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Some Athenians were curious about his teachings and brought him to the Areopagus to explain further, as they were accustomed to hearing and discussing new ideas.

Verse 22: 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.'

Paul tells them God, the creator of everything, is not confined to human-made shrines nor dependent on human service, as He provides for all life and is actually close to each person. Then he says something astounding:

Verse 28: 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."

Paul then preaches the gospel of Jesus' resurrection to them.

Then Scripture says:

Verse 32: 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.

Let us pray.

Seated in my office, the young man's voice dripped with anger as he accused: "You've changed!" It's often a veiled plea for stability in a frightening world, expecting their pastor to remain a constant amidst their anxiety.

I've grown to receive it as a compliment. I'm always tempted to say, "You mean I've grown? Thank you, I hope so!"

Theologian and philosopher Muhammad Ali said: “The person who views the world at 50 the same as they did at 20 has wasted 30 years of their life.”

He also said, “Float like a butterfly sting like a bee – his hands can’t hit what his eyes can’t see.” But that’s for another day.

But Paul? Now THAT was some change! His biography might be entitled “From ISIS to the Sermon on the Mount: The Apostle of Transformation.” I think the exchange here in Acts 17 gives us a picture of someone whose theology, demeanor, approach expanded, and became more inclusive, more generous. Paul was living into the New Normal of post resurrection life. I’m framing what Paul does here as an invitation.

An Invitation to be:

#1 A people of dialogue vs. dogma.

In his past, Paul’s every cell would have urged him to challenge Athens’ polytheism with his monotheism, prioritizing correctness over dialogue. He would have been consumed by black-and-white thinking, readily correcting and rebuking others.

The resurrection changed all of that for Paul. He now has an epistemological humility. That’s a fancy way of saying he knows he doesn’t know it all. Or as he put it, “We see through a glass dimly.”

Is that the way people view the church? Driving by a church and they say, “Oh those are the people who don’t have it all figured out!” I’m afraid not. What does it mean to be a church of dialogue? It begins with listening, and the humility to know you have lots of blind spots, and we need others to gently show us.

Here we have a Paul who looked for common ground. Looked for ways to affirm the humanity of each person. Who understood that all of us are in this together.

#2 A people of celebrating vs demonizing.

“For we too are his offspring,” Paul says quoting a philosopher of the day.

In a previous life I was a junior youth pastor of around 100 kids. I would sometimes start meetings telling them to address each other as “your majesty.” It was a fun exercise. The lesson was obvious: every individual is royalty, a child of the Most High God, bearing God’s image.

“Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

Do you believe that? I’ve been here for six weeks, listening to lots of stories that include the pain of feeling misunderstood or hurt by the words of others. So, what I’m thinking is we need to take this to heart. No judgment here, humans under stress say things they would

like to take back. But here's what I believe: The first step in our healing journey is right here: Remembering that each person we encounter is "the holiest object presented to our senses and recognizing each person first and foremost as a beloved child of God."

And beyond us, we, as a church, acknowledge that regardless of beliefs, agreements, or differences, all are God's offspring. Whether Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, followers of any other faith, or non-religious, we embrace each other and our diverse religious traditions as valuable gifts bestowed upon us by God, reflecting His goodness towards humanity.

#3 A people of affirmation vs. aversion.

Paul doesn't hide his faith. He visits the Areopagus, the Marketplace of Ideas. It's like being invited to Harvard, Yale, Stanford, or my Alma Mater, the University of Florida all at once. What? What's so funny about including Harvard in that list?

Paul goes out beyond his comfort zone, beyond his confirmation bias, looking for ways to connect, to engage. Why?

Paul believed that God created everything and everyone, considering all as God's offspring, meaning nothing was beyond God's care. For him, every aspect of life was infused with God's presence. So, to Paul, even the revered Areopagus was just another space where God had already been and was present. As he told the Athenians, "God is not far from each one of us."

"God is not far from each one of us." I used to think God was way out there. And lo and behold, God is near, God is already here, inviting us to wake up to his presence. Might be a good morning mantra: "Loving God, help me today to be present to your presence."

#4 A people of expansion vs tribalism.

Paul looks at all the idols. Athens was smothered by idols. One ancient historian called Athens a place that was "One great altar, one great sacrifice".

In the midst of all those idols, and inscriptions, Paul finds a way to affirm their religious inclinations (v 22-28) and quotes one of these idols "To an unknown god" and then quotes from their own frame of reference, "in him we live and move and have our being". This was a quotation from Aratus, a pagan poet, written about 270 BC in Athens.

Australian Theologian William Loader put it this way:

Paul is saying "And so in this land the Spirit was also speaking 200, 300, 3,000, 40,000 years ago. And we need to hear what the Spirit was saying to the Aboriginal people and what the Spirit is saying through them to us. The same Spirit brooded in the Indian subcontinent, in Arabia, and the same Spirit speaks in the language of the poets and the artists, the novelists and the playwrights of every age. The Spirit is free and our calling is to rejoice and to discover, to dialogue and to enjoy the common life of the Spirit. We need to sit down and hold hands with all who listen for the voice of the one who is not far away, who is the ground of all life and being."

#5 A people of commendation vs. coercion.

In all of this, Paul has a story to commend.

Paul's confidence for addressing a venue such as the Areopagus rested upon events that were matters of historical record and open to public debate, discourse, and inquiry for all honest seekers. In that sense the Areopagus was the most natural and fitting of venues for Paul.

Paul commends a story with a creator God who cannot be captured in temples made with hands or poured into molds of human images. This is the God of all peoples, the God not distant from any of us, the divine being present to all.

Not everyone will like these ideas.

The text says that "some scoffed" at Paul. That just means communication is happening. Scoffing is just the first step for most of us.

And I'll add, the scoffing also came from within his own tribe as well.

Have you noticed that the generous expansive version of Christian faith doesn't make you popular with Christians? Just tweet on Twitter some of the things I've said in this sermon and prepare to duck. From other Christians.

Richard Rohr told me in 2015, after I told him our church would be publicly declaring our welcome and celebration of our LGBTQ friends said to me, "It's going to be hard. You will get some nasty emails. People don't really want the gospel, it's too hard. They want a belonging system that confirms their biases." I didn't know what he really meant but I would find out.

Others said, "We'll hear this again." That too is positive. Like a child asking "read it again," there is hope that this story could be true. Maybe that's you today. I don't believe this, but it would be great if it were true, tell it to me again. At this church, you can take your time, there won't be any pressure.

Others believed. Not because they had it all figured out, or believed perfectly (impossible) but simply trusted that here's a story I can build my life on. Maybe that's you today.

In the New Normal, a new community is born with the capacity to truly be good news for everyone.

- Valuing dialogue over dogma.
- Celebrating each person in all their diversity.
- Joining with God to repair the world.
- Listening and learning from all of God's offspring whether they are in our tribe or not.

- Commending the story and way of Jesus without coercion

In many ways, this describes the church we aspire to be. And when we are like this, expect lives to be changed, communities to be renewed, and a taste of a world that is driven more by hope and love than by fear and division. Amen.