

The Good News in Another Culture

November 25, 2007

Acts 17:16-34

Synopsis:

The challenge for the church is to take the Gospel to a culture in terms that it can understand but without compromising the message of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

I.

Pastor Jeff asked last week, “What are the questions that guide our lives?” I’d like to say that the question of “faithfulness” is on the top of my list.

How can I be faithful to the good news that I’ve received in Jesus Christ as it was passed on to me by my parents and the church families that nurtured my faith?

But what about people and cultures that are completely foreign to the Christian tradition? How do we faithfully communicate what we have received to them in a way that is winsome and relevant?

We’re going to find a good example today as we take a look at the Apostle Paul’s experience in Athens. Let us pray.

Prayer: Almighty God, thank you for giving us such good examples from scripture about how to share your grace with our friends and neighbors. Continue to teach us through your word how to meet people right where they are so that *they* might meet

you right where you are, God of the universe who reigns in justice and love. Amen.

II.

If you ever studied the beliefs of Bahai faith or Hinduism or even the Latter Day Saints, you get a sense of how strange other religions can sound at times. You might ask, “What do you mean I get to rule my own planet when I die?” Or, “How is it possible that I’ll be reincarnated as a cat?” Or “Why would I want more than one wife when I go to heaven when I’m having difficulty pleasing the one I have?” Faiths of other traditions can sound pretty strange to those of us who were reared without a lot of exposure to them.

III.

As Paul finds himself in Athens, that’s exactly what his words sound like to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When they ask, “What does this babbler want to say? He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities,” what they mean is, “This guy’s got a lot of strange ideas about foreign religions.” But that’s the way we sound to people if we don’t find a way to speak their language.

So the first thing we need to understand when we're sharing our faith is that people may be coming from an entirely different frame of reference than we are.

IV.

Paul was a Jewish rabbi, taught by the finest scholar of his day, Gamaliel, and he had spent his life thinking and reasoning through the Scriptures. But notice, he does not begin his witness to the Council of Philosophers in Athens, which was known as the Areopagus (p. Air-op-agus), by reciting Jewish history to them. To do so would have been meaningless to an audience that was well versed in Plato and Aristotle, but entirely ignorant of what we know today as the Old Testament Scriptures.

V.

Luke, the writer of Acts, gives us insights into Athenian culture when he mentions parenthetically, *"²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new."* Talking about new philosophical ideas was their national pastime. They didn't have football to watch on big screen T.V.s., so *instead they debated in the public square* the latest philosophies of their day. This was a major source of entertainment for them.

VI.

Paul senses this about the people of Athens and uses their passion for debating to engage them with the good news of Jesus Christ. For days, he's been walking around Athens and seen all the alters to the Greek gods. In fact, from where he's speaking on Mars Hill, you can look down over the entire city and see these enormous statues sticking up above the skyline everywhere you look.

Paul is a great evangelist because he is able to quickly appreciate the Athenian's frame of reference and use that understanding for the sake of sharing his message.

VII.

But he's also a great evangelist for another reason. We are told that when Paul saw all these idols he *was "deeply distressed."* His soul ached and was twisted at *the sight* of all this idolatry. As a devoted Jew, Paul grew up in a tradition that had seen how angry God became over idol worship. The worst judgments Israel faced in its history always came in response to worshiping idols. An idol is anything, or anyone, whom you trust to save you, to make your life whole.

Throughout the Hebrew history, there would be time when people grew tired of looking for salvation from a God who *was so demanding*, so they would turn their hearts towards the gods of

wood and stone that they could make with their own hands. These gods promised all sorts of things—fertility, prosperity, safety—and the best thing about them was that they *were much less demanding*.

So you can only imagine how much effort it took for someone like Paul to restrain himself from launching into an angry tirade about the dangers of idolatry. To do so would have been to place his concerns above their own, to place his understanding of how God works above their need to hear the hope of the gospel.

Had he preached a sermon right at that moment on how God judges those who worship idols, he would have lost the Athenians forever, because they wouldn't have been able to hear that God hates idols, **not** because what they pretend to offer is bad, but because they fail to deliver what they pretend to offer.

VIII.

Paul's restraint is an important example because in believing that **we** have the truth about God, it is also easy for us to miss the moment we're in with people and push them away from God for the wrong reasons. We end up answering questions that the people we're with aren't even asking.

Paul doesn't make this mistake. He uses the Athenian's frame of reference and even their altar to an unknown god as a way of

leading them to the God that they can know through the justice and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

IX.

As human beings, we like to be right, especially when it comes to things that we care deeply about. We also like to look good, so when we don't know everything we'd like to know on a subject, we tend to get defensive, as if the more we raise our voices the better we'll get our point across.

The problem with these tendencies is that they can cloud our vision and plug our ears to the questions that the people around us are really asking. We can begin seeing people as adversaries that need to be convinced of our truth, rather than as people who need the grace and mercy of God, just like we do.

X.

I've noticed over the years that conversations about religion can become more about believers being right than they are about the Spirit of God reaching into a person's heart and inspiring faith in them. Especially in this generation when people are being sold things at every turn, they will shut you off immediately when they sense you are more interested in being right or selling an agenda than you are about them as a person with real needs and concerns, just like you have.

Every once in a while, therefore, we ought to step back and ask ourselves, “What’s really going on here as we try to share the love of God with people?” Are our efforts more about us pushing our agenda or is it truly about us coming alongside people in such a way that they will find the truth about God?

XI.

If you’re curious about an effective methodology of sharing the gospel with others, here it is. Paul begins by building a case of the one true God, using examples the Athenians would understand. Then he establishes common ground by what they agree on about God, even quoting one of their poets, saying, “In him we live and move and have our being” (vv. 24-29). And then, finally, he moves his message to the person of Jesus Christ, centering on his resurrection (vv.30-31).

XII.

Let me tell you a story. A couple of years ago I began getting to know a nephew of mine who had broken off his relationship with the Jehovah’s Witnesses. If you’re not aware of the Jehovah Witnesses, he tells me they are an extremely works-oriented and oppressive off-shoot of Christianity that uses a translation of the Bible re-written by their founder.

J.W.'s don't allow celebration of birthdays, church holidays, or even civic holidays, for example. Their main method of motivation is shame and guilt rather than grace and freedom. You are judged worthy by the number of doors you knock on each month and shamed when you don't meet your quotas. And when members ever disassociate with the church, they usually get as far away from structured religion as possible because they don't want to fall back into their previous bondage. They throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak.

XIII.

So you can just image what was going on in my Nephew's mind when we began to spend time together. He definitely had a different idea of what a minister of the gospel would be like than the one he found in me.

He was surprised, for example, that I was so ready to admit that the Bible doesn't answer all of our questions in exacting detail. I just told him it answered the ones that mattered most in as much detail as God wanted to give us, but that it doesn't answer every question that comes to our minds.

He was also surprised to find that I was hesitant to speculate about matters about which the Bible itself doesn't make clear, as

if I might need to speak for God when God doesn't care to speak for himself.

And thirdly, he was surprised that I was not a bit anxious about his conversion to Christianity. He discovered that I don't have any problem leaving that work to God and don't take any responsibility for the choices that people make, as long as I feel I've done the best job I can in introducing them to Jesus.

I'll have you know that after about two years of getting together with my nephew, and introducing him to friends at this church, he's become quite curious about our faith. He's interested not because we have all the answers but because we are willing to honor his questions in a loving and respectful way. In other words, he gets the sense that we are committed to him as a human being first, and as a friend who needs the grace of God just like we do.

XIV.

Like the apostle Paul, we should do everything we can to know more about the Bible, what it means, and how to apply it to our lives. But in today's culture, people are more interested in knowing that you care about them as a person and are willing to take a learning posture with them as you discover God's grace and justice together.

People have a keen sense when you're pushing an agenda they feel they have not discovered on their own. As Paul shares the good news of Jesus Christ with the people in Athens, he does so in a way that connects with their reality as worshippers of an unknown God.

If we present the gospel because we want people to agree with us or because we want the approval of our church or for any other reason than because people matter to God, that's not the good news of Jesus Christ. That's the good news of Tom Cramer, or Julie Smith, or Sheryl Jones, or John Billingsworth. The only agenda worth pushing is the love and justice of God and his desire for all people to find true life in him.

XV.

Let me offer a caution here. Because one's approach is one of love, it doesn't mean that the nature of our message is without judgment. If you read further in the chapter, you'll notice that Paul spoke about the *judgment* and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Even the most superficial reading of the Bible reveals that in both Old and New Testaments the love and judgment of God live side-by-side. It is *because he loves us* that *God reveals his judgment to us*. The opposite of love is *not* judgment or even anger. The opposite of love is indifference, *and God is not*

indifferent about people. He loves us so much that by his grace he presents his judgment upon our bad turns in life.

XVI.

Trying to get rid of the judgment of God is like trying to get rid of the North Star. It leaves you lost on the sea, *not* knowing how to turn the ship called your life. So the purpose of God's judgment is not to condemn us, but as Paul tells the Athenians, to *invite us to repent, or turn from the idols* who have led us astray.

XVII.

Notice the Athenian's reaction to Paul's presentation. Some laughed; others said they wanted to hear more later; and others joined him and became believers themselves.

As we've seen before in this sermon series on Acts, it's our job to share as much as we know about God with others, and it's God's job to reveal himself to others through the power of the Holy Spirit. Some people may laugh and walk away. But others will come to know the God *"in whom we live and move and have our being."*

May God give us sensitive hearts to see how we might present the good news of Jesus Christ in a winsome and relevant way to an increasingly multicultural society. Amen.

