

Proclaiming the Unknown God

Martha Langford

Third Presbyterian Church

May 25, 2014 (Easter 6A)

Psalm 66:8-20, John 14:15-21, Acts 17:22-31

Hearing Paul's testimony before the sophisticated crowds of the Areopagus, I feel compelled to share a personal encounter.

I was as far from the lofty heights of Mars Hill (the other name for the Areopagus) as possible—rolling a shopping cart through the seasonal aisle at the Southwest Houston Hobby Lobby. My daughter was still young enough to enjoy a fully-equipped Easter Basket, and I was checking out the possibilities while also buying the candles for our church's Good Friday service.

The young woman was also browsing the seasonal section—and my basket, which contained a syncretistic mix of plastic eggs, chocolate bunnies, a fuzzy stuffed lamb, potted lilies, and royal purple pillar candles.

She stopped and introduced herself, but twenty years have erased her name from memory. She noted the items in my cart, and then with shaking hands extended a business card to me.

It was an invitation to her church. It was someplace, she said, that had made a huge difference in her life. In its people, she found acceptance and love. Through its teaching she learned to pray and read scripture.

The community has become the locus of her growing faith in God and her growing love for herself and for others. "You should come," she said, "It could make a difference for you too."

I was already on the path to becoming a pastor—but I didn't tell her that. Instead, I thanked her.

I thanked her because I was grateful for the love of God that had changed her life. I thanked her because I was grateful that she let that love overflow its bounds to wash over a stranger in the aisles of the local marketplace.

In reading about Paul's exploits in the Areopagus, I came across this quote: "Here is Paul, alone in Athens, after being driven out of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea, a solitary witness, once again trying to be faithful in yet another strange and complex situation."¹

Perhaps that is the mark of discipleship—that we do our best to be faithful witnesses in strange and complex situations.

Certainly Paul's situation is complex—he has been chased out of Thessalonica and then the agitators followed him to Beroea, stirring up anti-Paul sentiment there as well. Friends hustled him to safety then brought him to Athens where he waited alone for Silas and Timothy to catch up.

In Athens, Paul found a city of people who were spiritual hungry. That hunger had led to a growing pantheon of god and goddess adopted from other nation-states. It was a sure-fire cure for spiritual boredom and unmet spiritual needs. Tired of this god—move on to the next. No answer for what ails you—find your cure with the next goddess down the street.

In their religious quest, the Athenians leave no stone unturned, so along with the temples and shrines to this vast panoply of deity, they have erected an altar “to an unknown god...”

Stranded alone in Athens, Paul took time to see the sights, talk up the local synagogue, and debate the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the marketplace preaching the message of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

And frankly, it is not altogether clear from the text in Acts whether Paul comes to the Areopagus of his own free will: it seems that the Stoics and Epicureans “took him” to the most important venue in Athens to explain this “new teaching” he was sharing in the marketplace.

You can still visit the Areopagus in Athens. It is a bare marble hill across from the entry to the Acropolis. The name in Greek is “hill of Ares” and in Latin it is known as “Mars hill.”

It was the meeting spot for the council of elders, chief magistrates who ruled the city-state instead of a king—the birthplace of Greek democracy. In Paul’s time, it was the place where the most influential Athenians gathered to resolve matters of law and philosophy and politics.

And there he was, a provincial Jew proclaiming a crucified and risen Jewish Messiah.

Don’t you wonder how that went over... after all Paul’s not in Tarsus anymore!

I can only imagine that Paul faced a pretty daunting communications task—after all, he’s in strange circumstances, in a strange city, with a strange culture.

Talk about your communication gap. I can picture him grasping for common ground—kind of like me trying to decipher my daughter’s latest text message by Google searching the meaning of acronyms like I.D.K.

(that’s “I don’t know” to the rest of us).

Yet, Paul does more than grope his way through--he bridges the gap as if it weren’t there.

Beverly Gaventa sums it up this way: “Paul begins with a complimentary word about the Athenians’ religious observance, saying nothing that might give offense. He moves to establish his own point about the oneness of God, carefully dressing a profoundly biblical theme in local fashion. He employs rhetorical strategies that would have been perfectly congenial to his audience. He even quotes a poem and keeps his remarks mercifully brief.”

There is much to celebrate and emulate about Paul in the Athenian Areopagus.

For starters, he was what homiletics professor John McClure calls a “determined” “adaptive” and “thoughtful” witness...

Determined, because Paul did not let his physical or cultural surroundings silence his witness. Adaptive, because he did let his surroundings shape the story he told.

His words and phrases would have been immediately recognizable to the learned Athenian crowd. He begins not with a word of condemnation, but with a word of invitation declaring their “unknown god”—that cover-all-the-bases after thought—to be the one true God, the Lord of heaven and earth.

With gratitude, he declares the actions of God in creating the world and all that is in it, including the people of Athens.

He speaks of the human condition—our spiritual restlessness—that leads us to grope after this unknown god “in whom we live and move and have our being...” a phrase from the Greek poet Aratus. He then declares all present to be God’s offspring—another motif from the religious discourse of the day.

Having spoken to them through the voice of their culture, he then shifted to a very counter-cultural message: that as God’s children, we shouldn’t mistake the work of human hands and the imagination of art and call it a god...

He makes it clear that the Athenians were accountable for the all-too-human tendency to worship that which is not God and calls them to repent—which in the language of the day would have been a call to change their minds and reorient their spiritual, moral compass toward God.

Finally, his oration is thoughtful, presented with a personal humility and out of a boundless generosity that impels him to introduce outsiders to the God who creates and cares for us all.

From Paul to the present age, this is our heritage.

When we are, “At our best,” Dan Clendenin says, “Christians have always been just as comfortable living, learning and sharing the Gospel in the market of ideas as in the ministry of the church, in bars and board rooms as well as in basilicas, in university lecture halls as easily as in church fellowship halls...”ⁱⁱ

Our passage today invites us to learn and then share the good news—in the language of the culture around us, with humility and generosity that mirrors the boundless grace of the God who is the ground of our being.

We are called to recognize the spiritual hunger in ourselves and in others as a starting point to speak a word about our experience of God’s presence.

I can’t help but think of that lovely young woman and that encounter in Hobby Lobby, where she discerned the signs of spiritual hunger in the contents of an Easter Basket...

She had experienced good news through a community of faith, had learned the soul curing expansiveness of God’s love. She was grateful for the heart-felt depths that could be address in prayer and the genuine solace to be found in scripture.

She gathered her courage, her experience, and her intuition that I too might be groping after an unknown God. She then opened her heart in hospitable welcome and shared that good news that this God was not so very far away.

I can't think about all the people over the years, who have had the courage to bear witness to God and share their faith with me—family, church community, friends and strangers--all speaking in the language of the present day and personal experience which resonated with my life. All opening their hearts in hospitable welcome that made God *real* to me.

In this Easter season, I have witnessed the birth of my first grandchild. I wonder how the good news will come to her. I wonder what language we will find to share an ancient story and our ancient experience in ways that will be meaningful to her and to all those who will reach adulthood in 2035...

I hear Paul's sermon at the Areopagus and wonder what cultural proficiency we need today—to recast our message of the hope and love and grace found in Jesus Christ to a world that is filled with despair and indifference and a panoply of modern idols (some of which may even be our own).

Then I remember Hobby Lobby—and the words of an old hymn tune race through my head...

“If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, “He died for all.” There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

Paul in the Areopagus challenges us to tell the love of Jesus and the majesty of our God to a world that is filled with spiritual longing that it sometimes cannot name.

So this day, may we go forth to proclaim the unknown God, with determination, courage, adaptability, and thoughtfulness—energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Amen.

ⁱ John S. McClure, “Homiletical Perspective on Acts 17:22-31” found in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol 2*.

ⁱⁱ Dan Clendenin, “The Areopagus Then and Now” from The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself blog (www.journeywithjesus.net) essay posted 25 April 2005.