

Sharing Christ in a Multicultural World

Acts 17:16-34

*“He was the true light that enlightens everyone
coming into the world.” (John 1:9)*

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Perhaps you have heard the puzzle: What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Unitarian?...Someone who knocks on your door; and then, when you open, he doesn’t know what to say.

When the Apostle Paul knocked on the Athenians’ door, in the heart of their intellectual and religious community, he knew what to say; and he had a remarkably convincing way of saying it. Today I want us to look at how Paul shared the good news of Christ in his multicultural, multi-religious context, as a model for how we can do the same.

A generation or two ago, here in the heart of the Bible Belt, one would see a lot of bumper-sticker theology. One more famous (or maybe infamous) one read: “The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.” I think we would agree that in today’s world, as it was in Athens in Paul’s day, those kind of closed-mind certainties don’t work any more. Clarksville is a city of higher learning, with Austin Peay State just a block down the street from us; and a great deal of pride in the public and private schools in Clarksville. Let me suggest that, in a city and a culture where the search for truth is valued, the Apostle Paul offers a winning model for us, in how to share the good news of Christ.

If we think we live in a multicultural world today, it was at least as much in the ancient world of the Roman Empire. The *Pax Romana* had unified the world politically from Rome to Palestine, from North Africa to Britain. The engineering feats of the stone Roman Roads unified the world in terms of travel, commerce, culture, and communication. Athens was the poster child of all these cultures, ethnicities, philosophies, and religions coming together. Thus, the “Areopagus.” Our scripture lesson for today tells us that the Athenian philosophers brought the Apostle to “the Areopagus.” This was a council of philosophers dating back to the days of Plato and Socrates some four centuries before Christ. If the Sanhedrin were the priests of the Jewish world of Jesus, the Areopagus was the Council of “priests” in the Greek world. Into this

multicultural, multi-religious world came Paul, a passionate new convert to Jesus. Paul was well trained for such an encounter, schooled under the tutelage of Rabbi Gamaliel, of the progressive intellectual heritage of rabbinic Judaism.

Paul's sharing of his faith in Christ had a pattern we could all follow: Listen, Point, Invite. First, Paul LISTENS. Because in his letters, Paul seems so certain about everything, and so passionate in his communication, we may not think of him as a very good listener. In this context at least, Paul began by listening. Luke observes Paul, roaming the streets and marketplaces of Athens. He was "greatly distressed" by all the idols he saw each one needing to be honored and appeased in some desperate attempt to make a connection. He listened *compassionately*, not judgmentally. He must have picked that up from the stories about Jesus who "*saw the crowds, and had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a Shepherd.*" (Matthew 9:36)

Paul listened *respectfully*, not disparagingly. "*Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are, in every way. I went through your city, and looked carefully at the objects of your worship.*" Though, as a Jew, he must have had a visceral revulsion to their polytheism and idolatry, nevertheless his compassionate listening respected these "objects of worship" as expressions of sincere longing to make contact with the God they did not know. He quoted their own philosophers—Epimenides, "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28); and Aratus, "We too are His offspring." The hope of monotheism was repeatedly trying to rise up from the fog of the many gods, from Socrates on to the time of Christ. And Paul LISTENED.

Then Paul POINTS. He points to their own hearts and longings, their poets and philosophers. He doesn't put them down, he affirms the essence of their hearts longing and their minds' reaching. "*I found among your gods an altar with an inscription: 'To an unknown god.'* What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:23) And he spoke to them about Jesus and his resurrection.

Now, if there is "a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea,"¹ does it not make sense that, just as God gave the Jewish prophets a vision that prepared the way for Jesus, so would God not plant "good dreams"² in the heart of Gentiles as well, that would express itself in their philosophies and poetry, their Greek Tragedies, and even in our fairy tales as C.S. Lewis discovered? As Lewis put it, "If ever myth became human personality, it was in Jesus Christ." Or as John's Gospel puts it, "*He was the true Light that enlightens everyone coming into the world.*" (John 1:9)

¹ Frederick William Faber, 1854, Hymn #298 *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, 1990 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox).

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing), 1943.

It is probably not by accident that my daughter, Megan, is with us today. As we talked over this message together this week, Megan reminded me of the one who played the role of Apostle Paul to her. Some time ago, in her post-college years, she had parted ways with Christianity; she would have described herself as “spiritual, but not religious”. But she had a Christian friend, Lisa, with whom she could talk about deeper things. She could do so because Lisa was not too eager to convert her; she just listened. But then one day, the teachable moment came when Lisa POINTED. She pointed to Megan’s own experience. “You want to find spiritual truth, right?” Yes! “Maybe you could just start praying to “the spirit of truth,” and see where it goes. Alcoholics Anonymous calls this “the Higher Power.” The Apostle Paul called it “the unknown god.” It was months, maybe years, later when the events of Megan’s life had brought Christ into full focus, that she was reading in the Gospel of John, where Jesus is instructing the disciples about the Holy Spirit that was to come. *“When the Spirit of Truth comes, the Holy Spirit, He will lead you into all truth...”* (John 16:12-14). Then she realized that Lisa had been pointing her to “the unknown god” inside of her, who led her ultimately to Jesus, the one true God, in human personality.

Paul listened; he pointed; and then he INVITED. When, in Athens, Paul connected the dots between “the unknown god” and Jesus, *“some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this’...”* As you have pictured the seekers among the Athenians, as you have heard Megan’s story, is there someone who has come to mind for you. Quite possibly the Holy Spirit has brought that person into your mind, one who has been prepared to have a friend LISTEN, and then POINT, and then INVITE to search the scriptures with you—either at church, or in a small group, or in your own one-to-one where you both can read through a Gospel, ask questions, and together ask to be led to “the Spirit of Truth.” Perhaps that invitation is simply to have lunch together with some of your Christian friends, and let that seeker just listen to others talk about their faith and how it works in their daily experience.

Wherever that invitation leads you, know that what is shared of the good news is not a foreign language to your friend. As Paul said, *“He is not far from each one of us, for ‘in him we live and move and have our being,’ in fact, ‘we are his offspring.”* (Acts 17:27-28) John said it even better, I think, when he opened his Gospel with the truly good news that your friend already has Christ planted deep within. *“He is the true Light that enlightens everyone coming into the world.”* (John 1:9) Alleluia! Amen.