

Welcome

Have you heard the saying about “the other side of the tracks” or “the wrong side of the tracks”? Usually this saying refers to the poor, undesirable, and dangerous part of town. That distinction of town usually classified the people from that particular part of town as coming from a poor family and possibly seeing the people as less than. This type of classification does not address how the people are possibly disenfranchised, excluded, and kept out of “right side of the tracks.”

Have you ever been told to stay clear of a certain area in your town or city? Or have you ever been told not to hang around a certain type of person? It’s no fun to be excluded. Have you been excluded from events or activities for a certain reason. Have you been denied access or service because of the color of your skin or gender?

I think we’ve probably seen movies or read books where people are categorized by social class, or ethnic and religious backgrounds. We’ve probably heard of culture wars where engagement with a certain group of people should be avoided. We might have been taught how to defend ourselves from the influence of other beliefs that are not like our own. Whatever it may be, there is an “us versus them” mentality.

In the passage today, the people of Athens, Greece were avoided by Jewish people. The Jewish people were intentional to not interact with the Gentiles because they were unclean based on the teachings in the Torah. Maybe we have done the same where we do not engage with others in order to not tarnish or make ourselves less than holy. We will discuss how God calls us to dismantle unhealthy beliefs that alienate those who have religious teachings different from the Christian faith and how God calls us to have authentic engagement where he is already present.

Message

Welcome to Easter-tide! We’re in the season of hope - the time between Easter and Pentecost, between resurrection and God’s gift to us of the Holy Spirit. Our series is called RECONNECTED. We’re asking what it looks like to be plugged in - both to God and to the world to which God calls us. What are the practices, attitudes and orientations God calls us to and gifts us with that enable us to be a church that engages and cares about the world around us?

For these questions, we’re in the book of Acts, which recounts the beginnings of the church. How did we go from a group of scared people who fled from the authorities when Jesus was arrested to a group that faced down persecution and fearlessly spread the good news of Jesus’ resurrection to the world around us?

We began by reflecting on the impossibility of our call - to embody Jesus in this broken and breaking world? How could we possibly accomplish all God call us to? We can't, which is why God gives us the Holy Spirit. Then we explored what it means to worship together, and to be together in a way that orients us not toward ourselves, but to the larger world, especially those who are most vulnerable. Last week, we saw that God calls us to engage those who are part of our faith tradition but may not know Jesus.

Today, I want to invite you to explore the opposite extreme. How do we share Jesus' good news with people who are not Christian and who may not share some of our basic beliefs about who God is. Let us remove the temptation to criticize and judge. Let us listen and cultivate new relationships with others to help them to know God better.

Turn with us to [Acts 17](#).

We've explored the past few weeks what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. If you have been in the church for some time, one thing that we've probably been told is how to defend your Christian faith. We might have been told what to say or what specific biblical passages to use in order to make a clear defining statement of our Christian faith. In almost any debate form, we want to win our argument and to be right. In turn, we want the other person, the nonbeliever to see how wrong they are in their argument, their belief, in whatever they have been taught. We think that in our defense, we will win over the non-believer, the sinner. In our attempt of this type of sharing the gospel, we end up demoralizing or demonizing the other person.

I can understand that you are not like the other person. We are all different, unique, and we have various backgrounds. There are certain types of people that we are more comfortable to be around. There are others we tend to avoid or are told not to associate with.

In the passage today, the Jewish people purposefully avoided the unclean Gentiles. It was what they were told. They are only following the Torah that tells them to remain clean and not defile themselves. Here comes Paul, a Jew who is educated and formed in Torah teachings. Paul goes to Athens and begins to interact with whoever he meets each day in the marketplace.

In biblical times, Athens was one of the places known for Greek learning and culture. People there were inquisitive and took the time to learn. Athens was also a polythesitic society where they worshiped more than one god and had many deities. The Athenians community reflected their beliefs and there were many idols. Athens had philosophical schools. Two types of philosophical schools are highlighted in Acts 17. It is the Epicureans and Stoics. Epicureans sought after a restrained kind of pleasure that was free from anxiety and mental pain. Epicureans were against how gods and death brought about fear and not peace of mind. The idea like, "all is good in moderation" would probably be their theme. Stoics believed virtue was the highest good and ethic to help bring about peace of mind. Stoics' theme would probably be, "life happens, remain calm."

I want to explain that highlighting Greek culture shows how vastly different the people are from those who were Jews and Gentile God-worshippers. We're not going to fixate so much on Greek culture. We read in Acts 17 that Paul is in Athens and since Athens is known for polytheism, it's interesting why Paul would be in distress that their city is full of idols. This isn't the first encounter Paul has had with the Greek community. Paul was a Greek speaking Jew from the Greek city, Tarsus. Paul dispels the notion to avoid the Gentiles, those who are part of the community of many gods and idols, the sinners. Dr. Willie Jennings commentary of the book of Acts explains how a place feels different when you are surrounded by idols, "[Idols] mark the boundary of difference, the wall of separation, and the point of divine hatred. (175)" Paul does what Jesus does, he does "not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17b) In the passage today, Luke narrates Paul coming to Athens not for the righteous.

Paul comes from a monotheistic religion. People who believed in the God of Israel did not participate often with the polytheist community of Athens. Paul is intentional of interacting with the Gentiles and is talking to anyone who will listen in the Athen's marketplace about Jesus and the resurrection. Paul does not intrude on the community of Athens. Paul spends time in the local context and speaks in the language the people speak. Some of the people Paul engages with are Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers decided to take Paul to Mars Hill to meet in front of their council.

Let us read Paul's address to the council on Mars Hill:

"So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: 'Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.

'He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

'His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

'God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the

world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.’

When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, ‘We want to hear more about this later.’ That ended Paul’s discussion with them, but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” -- Acts 17:17-34

The Word of the Lord.

We are aware that Paul is in a place that is much different than his beliefs and what he has been taught. Paul takes three days to acclimatize himself to the community of Athens. He already knows the Greek language and he did grow up in the Greek city of Tarsus. Think about an interaction with someone who speaks the same language as you versus when you don’t speak the same language. Communication is easier when you know the language of the people.

Paul associated himself to Athens and intentionally interacted with Jews, the Gentile God-worshippers, and non devout people. Interaction with people is easier when we are familiar with their customs and traditions.

Unlike other Jewish people, Paul crosses the tracks to meet the people where they are. Paul does not tell the people to come to the synagogue where he met with the Jew and the Gentile God-worshippers. Paul goes to the marketplace. Right there, Paul reaches out to the people. Paul does not display a “build it, they will come” type of evangelism. The type of interaction is not “we are taking Jesus to the people,” it is, “we are helping the people to know God better.”

There were mixed reviews by the people of Athens. Some saw Paul as a babbler. Some were curious and wanted to learn more. Paul was taken into custody and brought to the Athenian council.

Paul begins his speech by acknowledging that the Athenian audience is very religious. Paul’s speech does not begin in a sarcastic tone or insult. “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’” Paul starts with discussing their idols because that is what they know. They have been taught about gods from their Greek culture. But there was something stirring in their hearts and minds where not all believed in Greek gods and followed Greek religion. Epicureans were against how gods and death brought about fear and not peace of mind. Stoics believed virtue was the highest good and ethic to help bring about peace of mind. More than one person believed there was another god whom they have yet to know. Hence, an altar was set up for this “Unknown God.”

In the historical context, Paul simply states the facts. How we interpret it today is sometimes in a negative context where polytheistic societies are put down for not knowing or having been revealed of who the unknown god is. Paul does not think they are ignorant. He certainly doesn't speak down to them.

Something is unknown until we learn about it. We know that we are not floating around the earth. We have an idea or maybe a hunch that something is keeping us grounded. I don't know how many of you learned about gravity. Usually the first story we hear is when Issac Newton was sitting under an apple tree and an apple hit him on the head. It was this experience that helped him to come up with the law of gravity. It's a cute story to introduce us to laws of motion. There are things that you also feel and know to be true. You just can't explain and don't know until you learn about it or have a breakthrough. But the fact that you can't explain in words doesn't mean gravity doesn't affect you or that you don't know gravity on some intuitive level. This is Paul's claim about the Athenians' and any non-Jewish people's knowledge of God. They were interacting with God out of unfamiliarity or lack of information, but now Paul has come so they can name this god.

Let's pause and celebrate the God we have come to know because someone told US!

Paul expresses God is always present. Paul is walking around Athens and sees a shrine to an unknown god. I feel that the people of Athens felt the presence of a different god than the twelve prominent Greek gods. They couldn't explain it and acknowledged a god they have yet to know. Paul explains of the unknown god; *“This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about. He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth.”*

Paul tells the people of what we would call God's prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is God stirring our hearts to accept his love. God's grace does not force humans to make a decision. God loves and is present to even those who don't know him. In the passage, the people are aware of the presence of God. The relationship is not yet fully formed. Acts 17:27 explains that we perhaps feel our way towards God and find him. *“His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us.”* *“For in him we live and move and exist”* is Paul quoting Stoic poet Epiminedes. *“As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring,’”* Paul quotes Aratua of Cilicia, an Epicurean. *And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.”* There is a connection to the creator that Paul explains and who this God is to the world at large. The dialogue and framework of knowing God is not far. God lives and moves. God helps in understanding and reveals himself in meaningful ways. Paul's interaction with the people of Athens is not a missionary or ministry tactic. Paul is led by the

Spirit that transformed him. He tells of a God who seeks out the people, every human nation. Now that Jesus has come, we all can know God better. God moves from an unknown god to a God who loves.

Dr. Jennings asks, “What do you say to those radically outside yourself, radically different from you? What do you say to those whose religions and rituals you have been trained to loathe? (176)” Each cultural and ethnic group has a context of how they name and understand God. Paul did not demonize the people of Athens. He merely proclaimed, “People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way...What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you.” I have sat through many preachings and Christian teachings of this biblical passage that have demonized my Navajo culture, more broadly Native American Indigenous culture. Paul expresses that God is always present, even among the Athenian people who are surrounded by idols.

Native American, Indigenous culture do not have an idol of Creator or Great Spirit. Lame Deer who was a Lakota Medicine man described the Great Spirit, “is not like a human being... He is a power. That power could not be in a cup of coffee. The Great Spirit is no old man with a beard.” Native Americans also believe that this Great Spirit moves among us like the wind or a breath. Creator is described as “Diyin” in the Navajo language. Historically, missionaries and Christianized Navajos describe God as “Diyin God ” and will say specifically “God of the Bible.” I relate to “Diyin ” as understanding God as Holy Creator and being aware of Diyin’s Spirit is present in all of creation. Many Indigenous theologies have been dismissed due to forced theologies by Westernized Christians.

Sadly, it’s the dominant, ethnocentric group which determines what is right or wrong in the theology and lived out work of God. The fruit of Western Christian dismissal has been death and destruction - not the Fruit of the Spirit. How different would the outcome be if we spoke as Paul. What if, rather than condemning Navajo spirituality as godless, Western missionaries had seen that God was already at work among the Navajo as Diyin? What if they had been able to affirm Navajo values like the importance of the connection between humanity and creation? The Navajo teaching of finding each day the balance of goodness, harmony and peace?

We identify with Jesus as God’s agent of judgment. Would you rather be called a heathen or God’s offspring? Let us not put down any people who are also God’s offspring. Will another door be shut and another wall be built to protect your religious and cultural order? Why do we deny God’s presence? We acknowledge God’s creation and His spirit is present. Yet, we fail to acknowledge that God is already at work stirring our hearts *and* the hearts of those who don’t even realize it’s God!

In Paul's naming of God and our naming of God, we name who we are. Acts 17 shows that God does not favor one group of people over another and wants to show mercy to all. God is already present with all peoples of the world, already working among them. So how do we remove the wall of separation we have built? Can we acknowledge that whatever hatred and judgment we feel for others comes from us, not from God? Can we affirm that God is working among them, inviting us to join them and point out where God is at work?

Christians have a long habit of pointing out the difference between our faith and the spirituality of culture. But Paul didn't start there. Paul began by insisting that God is always present, even when we don't know it. Even among people who don't realize. God knows us long before we know God. The presence of the Holy Spirit stirs our hearts and it is the active presence of God within our lives that continually knocks and whispers to all people of divine love and mercy.

Prayer of Examen + Communion

Where in my week do I least expect to find God at work?

How can I make space for the Holy Spirit to shape my perspective this week?

How can I be on the lookout for God in those unlikely places this week?