

"Can We Keep God at a Distance?"

Acts 17:22-31; Ps. 66:8-20;

1 Peter 3:13-22

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When we want to start a conversation it's often helpful to find some common ground. Knowing we are in a similar line of work or live in the same neighborhood, drive the same model car, are married or not married, go to the same school, enjoy the same sports, have kids in the same activities... all of these provide points of contact and opportunities to start up a conversation.

If we are around strangers, the weather is often an easy place to start, especially this time of year. If we are a Yankee's or a Red Sox fan we could share a laugh about the Sox jersey that was buried in the cement at the new Yankee stadium to put a jinx on the Bombers.

That stunt shows us just how contemporary the Scriptures can be. We are still superstitious in a lot of ways, still trying to hedge our bets with God, still worried that if we "step on a crack we'll break our mother's back."

Today's story from the Book of Acts is about Paul's effort to make contact with the people of Athens. "Athens". The name is synonymous with culture and science, art and intellect. It is the centerpiece of the Greek World. We think of Socrates and Aristotle and Plato.

Paul wasn't there to evangelize. He'd been run out of the last town and now he's in Athens waiting around for Timothy and Silas to show up. In the meantime he can't help but notice something about the city. To his eye it is full of idols.

Everywhere he turns there are statues to the gods and goddesses. As a good Jew, a worshiper of the one God, it turns his stomach to see so much ignorance, and especially there - in Athens - the bright light of the ancient intellectual world.

What can he say? With whom can he speak? How can he begin a conversation in that pagan environment? Paul could have talked about the weather. Being a tentmaker by profession, he could have sought out the tent makers in Athens and talked shop.

If he had noticed that some construction worker who was sympathetic to the Athenian's arch enemy, Sparta, had just put a piece of Spartan armor under one of the pillars of the Parthenon in a move to jinx the place, he might have talked about superstition and gaining God's favor.

Wait a minute: Take away that made-up bit about the Spartan armor and put in its place the niche that reads "To the Unknown God" and Paul is off and running in his talk about religion.

"People of Athens! I see you are very religious folks. Everywhere I look I come across a statue or a votive candle or an offering to one of the gods. Such devotion is commendable!

"I also happened to see an empty niche with a curious inscription: 'To an unknown God'. If I didn't know better I'd think you were worried about offending some unknown deity.

"I guess that is what religion is all about for some: just a way of covering your bases and keeping the gods happy. If you are truly concerned not to miss any deity and not to cause offense, perhaps you'd like to hear about the God I worship and serve?

"You already acknowledge his presence in your town, even if you don't really know much about him. For, that's his niche, the one marked, 'To an unknown God.'"

From there, with careful rhetoric and skill, Paul created common ground with his listeners. He pointed out the beauty of creation that cries out "Glory" at every turn. He could have quoted the Psalmist and said "The Heavens are telling the Glory of God." But he didn't.

Instead he begged them to ask themselves whether the God who created the universe is a God who needs anything from us. This God certainly doesn't live in shrines made by us. This is not a God to be kept at arms' length, or appeased with a few offerings.

No, this God is the God who breaks into creation and has come near to each of us and who has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth and has confirmed his sovereign reign over life and death through Jesus' resurrection from the dead...

With his mention of resurrection, the crowd gets agitated and breaks up. "Resurrection? Nah, that's not for me..." Some call Paul a "fool", others say "well, that was different", and some others come to faith and respond to the message, including one of the city fathers named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris. But that's about it.

Not exactly a strong showing. In fact, there is no record of Paul ever founding a church in Athens. He had success in other towns - Philippi, Thessalonika, Corinth, but not here.

Too bad! And he started off so well, too. One would have thought that if anyone could make headway there in Athens, it would have been the author of the letter to the Romans. Intellectually, Paul could go

head to head with the best of them.

So, looking back on Paul's failure to win many over to Christ in Athens we have to ask ourselves, if Paul strikes out, what hope do we have?

Well, I believe there are important learnings which come to us from this story of Paul's flop in Athens.

First, we do have to start somewhere. If we are going to gain a hearing for the Gospel we have to make connections with the culture in which we live and move and have our being.

Second, we can't expect to hit a home run every time we open our mouths to talk about our faith.

Third, just talking about our faith without showing others the impact it has made on us or the way it has changed our lives isn't nearly as effective as demonstrating a transformed lifestyle.

In this speech to the Athenians, Paul never talked about his own experience, his conversion, the peace he had in the midst of persecution, the joy he found in being found by God, the forgiveness that he felt and the release from guilt and the freedom he had to give himself away for Jesus' sake.

Instead he came off as a babbler and a preacher of foreign divinities.

Faith has to be forged in relationships with others as well as a relationship with God. If faith were dependent on reason and intellect and brain power, then the smart ones would also be the spiritual ones and the smart Christians would own the spiritual high ground and we could make our appeal based solely on reason as we made the case for Christ.

But, as it is, we can only go so far on brain-power. Ultimately we have to acknowledge the foolishness that the Athenians saw in the crucifixion and the unreasonableness of the resurrection. It simply makes no sense for the God of the Universe to behave this way.

This is not the way Zeus would do it. Get a few thunderbolts ready and let them fly!

We may wish it were otherwise, but with a religion based, not so much on reason as on revelation, not so much on exposition as on example, we have to do more than just talk about it. We have to allow God to work in and through us. We need to practice the peace we proclaim. We must fall back on the forgiveness we have received and forge relationships based on love.

And we need to live as though God were not consigned to a niche in the wall or a book on the table or a chapter of our lives that is now part of our history, but as the one who is as near to us as breath, the one in whom we are immersed, in whom we "live and move and have our being."

As we live in this way, our activities as Jesus' disciples and our words as Jesus' evangelists come more into line and the connection between us and others can be forged. And we start right where others are

Words are important, to be sure, but if there is nothing about us that shows the joy we feel at being at peace with God through Christ, if there is nothing loving in our actions or hopeful in our outlook on life, what do we have to say to a needy world?... instead of talking about Jesus, we might as well strike up a conversation about a baseball shirt stuck in concrete...

Let us pray.