

Oh, God, from whom to be turned is to fall; to whom to be turned is to rise; and in whom to stand is to abide forever. Grant us in all our duties thy help; in all our perplexities, your guidance; in all our dangers, thy protection; and in all our sorrows, thy peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, our body, and our blood, our life and our nourishment.
Amen.

Finding God Where We Are

I have to admit that when I saw the lectionary text for this week I got excited. Telling a philosophy student to preach on Paul's Sermon to the philosophers Athens is like telling a distance runner to preach about the great race of faith in the book of Hebrews or a 5th grade girl to talk about Hannah Montana. In our text Paul gets in a philosophical discussion with the Epicureans and Stoics, both famous schools of philosophy from the first century. If you are interested in the philosophical ideas of each school, how Paul engaged them, and what he shares or sharply disagrees with each of them go with me to get some coffee and we can talk about it. What I would like for us to think about is a simple question, Where do you find God in the everyday? Underneath the metaphysical assertions and ontological critiques (yes that is the end of philosophical jargon) in Paul's sermon is a very profound answer to this simple question that may surprise us. And if we hear it and take it to heart, it can transform our image of God and empower us to live more generously out of our faith.

Before we read the text I thought it would be good to set it up. Athens is not your average city. It was the cultural, intellectual, religious, and artistic capitol of the Roman empire. Not only did the city happen to have artists and intellectuals on every corner, but they had the universities the Roman politicians were educated at, the first runs on the new ground-breaking theatrical pieces, and here in this text we find that they had a popular past time of public debate. I am told that there are people who avoid talking about religion and politics for entertainment, but at least in Athens it was a sport where you better bring your A game. Athenian pride at being the most reflective and religious city led to a spiritual hot-bed of syncretism, that is the blending together of many different religious ideas, philosophies, and spiritual practices. The desire to affirm everyone's belief and not to be exclusive created a pluralistic society, one where there were an unlimited number of 'versions of the truth' all out in the open and getting their air-time on the street corner or the local pub (or bath.....thank God that went out of style!!) Any way, the point here is simply that the cultural situation of Paul is not unlike our own. We find ourselves surrounded by a plurality of religions, philosophies, politics, and spiritualities and in the midst of this diverse culture we

have to figure out how to engage other 'versions of the truth' and understand our own so that we don't just turn our faith into a personal and private affair that has no meaning for us outside our inner-self.

How are we to understand and articulate the Christian faith in a pluralistic context? Let's walk with Paul through Athens and see how he does it..... Acts 17:16-34

When I was working on this sermon I saw a new friend. She sat down and talked to be about my sermon, told me what was going on her life, how I could pray for her, and then headed back to work. The story of how we met seems appropriate to tell.

It is 7:45 thursday morning and I am helping set up the meditation cushions in a downtown coffee shop. A group of us gather on thursdays for *lectio divina*, which is an ancient Christian spiritual practice that means sacred reading. Basically everyone gets centered and silent on our cushions, then someone reads a section of scripture, and then we sit in silence with whatever word or phrase stuck out to us during the reading. The goal isn't to reflect or interpret the scripture passage, but to use the piece that sticks out to steady your mind and let God interpret you with it. After about 20 minutes of silence a bell is rung to signal us to transition back to reality - that is if reality is the part of life where we are less conscious of God - any way, after the bell we thank God for giving us the gift of silence, communion, and for our word or phrase. When we are done those who want from the group who sat and prayed together shares their word from the passage and how it impacted them.

On this particular morning someone new showed up, Jamie she introduced herself, and she wanted to know if she had to believe anything to join the group for meditation. We said no and asked the basic get to know you questions before we began with a passage from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, "This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ...." When the time was over she shared her word and in almost poetic fashion described how she had been looking for a place to be herself and become more open to God. As we were walking out she said, "It is cool, that I can connect to God here with y'all after listening to a passage from a book I don't believe in about a great teacher I don't believe is God. I think I am going to bring some friends from my yoga class next week."

I have some well meaning Christian friends who would not have had Jamie pray with them and instead would have used the opportunity of a non-Christian's openness as a time to level the sword of truth on behalf of God. Sometimes 'just reporting' the truth is as far from loving as possible. The companion of all Christian truth is love.

Paul's approach in Athens can be contrasted with that of the missionary in Barbara Kingsolver's haunting novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. Nathan Price reached the Congo in 1959, with his wife and four daughters—full of zealous determination to convert the heathen. He wanted to bring them not only to faith, but, more importantly, to *true faith*. Upon the Prices' arrival at the village of Kilanga, a swarm of well-wishers among the residents greeted the newcomers. A fellowship meal had been arranged as part of the festive greeting. Being proper folk from the South, the Prices could not help but notice that most women moved about the village "all bare-chested and unashamed," with naked children clinging to their long skirts. Nathan Price was, like Paul in Athens, incensed at what he saw: "He had that narrow-eyed, lockjawed look like he was starting to get steamed up." The leader of the gathering asked Nathan Price, the newly arrived and honored guest, to pray. But rather than pray a sincere word of thanks, he used the opportunity to shame and castigate his hosts for their evil nakedness. It takes a special minister to weave three different images of apocalyptic violence into a single dinner prayer. And a man without subtlety to direct it at the wives and children of your host, but Nathan did.

There was no compromising Nathan Price's conviction. When this holy man of God saw that which incensed him, he let it be known, without hesitation and without mincing words. He had come to call the worthy out of the darkness, and would let his hearers know, without qualification or exception, what was right and what was wrong and just where he stood on the subject. This was a war of cultures, values, and faiths and there was no common ground to be found between the two sides. Nathan Price let go a battle cry with his very first utterance. He was going to conquer the Congo. Yet, in the end, the Congo conquered both Nathan and his family—but one needs to read the rest of the book to hear that story.

Paul is not Nathan, in fact I could imagine Paul being more incensed by Nathan than the statue to the unknown God or any of the philosophers in his midst. If you pay attention to Paul sermon you will see that he begins with affirmations he doesn't normally begin with. Why? This is the only sermon we have of Paul talking to people who did not know the story of Israel. So where does he begin?

With things he shares philosophically with his audience. I am just going to list them out, but if you are interested in the brilliant philosophical work of Paul in this passage let's do it over coffee.

- Unknown God.....Let me tell you what God has made known to me
- God is Creator
- God is Sustainer \ integral to human life
- God is present and connected to us
- The World is in God(immanence), but God is more than the World (transcendence)
- We are God's offspring (son of adam, son of God)

The point here beyond recognizing that Paul did not see these people as his nor God's enemies. Because he knows his culture he finds common ground and theologically what is surprising is that while the *common ground is found outside the church, it is inside of God....in whom we live, move, and have our being.*

Like Paul we are Christians. The way we see the world is tied to what was previously unknown to us and was made known in Jesus Christ. That is the truth we learn, celebrate, and contemplate here in worship and in our own lives of devotion - BUT here we see that when Paul engages a pluralistic culture he begins with things they share and with a strong affirmation that they live, move, and have their being in the God they are looking for. Paul is able to quote a popular poet and a renown philosopher that his audience would know and then engage the ideas thoughtfully and generously. Can we do that? Do we see all spiritual searching as evidence that humans were created for the purpose of connecting to God and as those in the body of Christ expect to find God at work in our culture - even a pluralistic culture like Athens? Paul did and I think we should follow his example.

Christians have for too long repeated the line *we are in the world but not of the world*, without ever realizing that as ambassadors of God's reconciliation we are **for** the world. When in a situation like Paul's, which is every day of 2008 in Winston Salem, we either meet the spiritual conversation of culture with a NO of judgment, a sprint to the door, or we capitulate or give into the cultural temptation to think that all religious truth is private and personal. To follow Paul's lead we must be both equipped and engaged. By equipped I mean we must actually have a decent understanding of our faith, the key ideas, concepts, stories, and images of the Christian faith so that we have something to share. If you don't feel equipped ask someone to help you out. I am sure you will find that in

learning more about your faith and thinking through hard questions, that God will begin to show up more in the everyday.

By engaged I mean that like Paul we should know what people are reading, watching, thinking, praying, and listening to. Not simply to criticize it, because apparently some Stoic poetry and philosophy moved Paul enough to memorize and repeat it in a sermon. Without being engaged in the culture Paul would have only had the option of pulling out a sermon he had preached in many synagogues and he would have used words and ideas that would have made mutual understanding near impossible. If his audience already thought 'resurrection' referred to the female consort of the deity Christ, imagine what confusion would have ensued if he had to run through the entire Old Testament in order to get to cross.

Paul began speaking from a culture he knew, about truths he found in it, in order to make his own faith understood in the conversation and not betray the loving character of truth in the process. I imagine a number of you have heard about Oprah's new book push. It is a book by Eckhart Tolle called the *New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. Along with plugging the book Oprah is accompanying it with podcasts, video lectures on the book, online discussions, and local book clubs. Because at least three of y'all mentioned it to me and a bunch of friends did I bought it, read it, and have been thinking about it. Thursday when I was editing down the sermon I ended up in two conversations about it. In the longer version of the sermon I do a little engaging with the book, but if you are interested again Coffee - with me. The point I want to make is that there are conversations to be had if we are only equipped and engaged.

Being equipped and engaged doesn't entail compromising our faith, but it does mean understanding it, owning it, and being graciously public with it. Paul ends his sermon as I will mine, by proclaiming the centrality of Christ and his resurrection.

Everyone has an organizing principle for their life, an ultimate concern, a framing story, or a first love. This principle is the bedrock from which we understand everything else. For Paul this organizing principle was the ministry, cross, and resurrection of Jesus. In the particular history of this particular human being the God who was unknown was revealed. Not only was there a new level of knowledge revealed in Christ, but the previous creation that had consistently found dead end streets due to our sin began a process of being made new. When we give ourselves to Christ we are made new, we have new life. Not only

are we new creations, but we are baptized into the body of Christ which has the vocation of participating with God in bringing God's new Creation into being. As Paul says, in the end - after all the problems, powers, and principalities that keep us from fully communing with God are defeated, God will be all in all. The work of God in Christ did something for the world that it could not do on its own. The Christian faith begins with the recognition that despite being created by God, living, moving, and having our being in God, being sustained each moment by God, being spiritual beings that desire to be united with our creator, **DESPITE ALL THESE THINGS**, human beings are not capable of producing our own answer for our problem. We do not simply need a teacher, enlightenment, awareness, or spiritual awakening, but a savior. We cannot come to an answer on our own - the answer comes to us. This is the human predicament as Paul saw it and the situation was completely changed because of Jesus Christ.

Because Christ was the central organizing principle in Paul's life he was able to engage culture on its terms and in its context. My prayer is that we too would let the story of Jesus be our operating principle, that we know it so we are equipped to engage the world, knowing that there is truth to be found and brought in our lives, friendships, and conversations. **AMEN**