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“Toward Light and Life”

Part VIII of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”

Acts 17:16-34

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Introduction

Paul and Silas are on their missionary journey. In the verses that precede our passage, we learn it was their custom to travel from town to town. Once in a new place, Paul would seek out the synagogue and spend three days there arguing with the rabbis and explaining how Jesus was the fulfillment of the scriptures. As you can imagine, this didn't go over well with everyone.

At the start of Acts 17, Paul and Silas are in Thessalonica. The synagogue there wasn't too thrilled with Paul's routine and enlisted the help of marketplace “ruffians” to set out after Paul and Silas. But instead of finding Paul and Silas, they descended upon the house of a believer named Jason. They attacked Jason and those with him, throwing them in prison. (Don't worry, the group eventually makes bail and are released on their way.)

The other believers whisk Paul and Silas out of town, and they head next to Beroea. Things were going a bit better for Paul in Beroea, until the old crowds in Thessalonica get word that he's proclaiming the same message in a new city, and take it up on themselves to follow him and run him out of Beroea. So, believers in Beroea whisk Paul away to the coast. They got as far as Athens, when Paul is left to wait for his friends Silas and Timothy to join him for the rest of the journey.

Not one to waste a good audience, Paul turns his attention to his new surroundings...



Acts 17:16-34 (NRSV)

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbling man want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?' ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' ³³ At that point Paul left them. ³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Sermon:

Who is this man who has made his way to Athens? The Paul we just read about embodies a new spirit. He is in a markedly new place. Paul, formed by Torah sensibilities, is rightly disturbed by the idolatry around him, but now he will do something stunning and productive with his outrage. Instead of turning away from the idolaters, he turns toward them. Paul reaches out to these Gentiles who could not be more removed from his own world of faith and culture.



Let's just take a moment to recognize the shocking shift this is for a man like Paul. The man who agreed to the stoning of Stephen now stands surrounded by stones that should evoke his righteous fury, yet he is able to yield to the Spirit who calls him to a new word.

What do you say to those radically different from you?

Days after the 2016 election, a Muslim student at the University of Texas named Amina Amdeen attended a march protesting the election of Donald Trump. Attending the same rally was Trump supporter Joe Weidknecht, sporting a sign that read "Proud to Be Deplorable" and a "Make America Great Again" cap.

Tensions were high and, at one point, things at the rally got pretty hot.

Amina remembered, "I noticed that you were surrounded by some people. And I noticed that they were being kind of threatening, and then somebody snatched your hat off your head. And that's the point where I, something kind of snapped inside me because I wear a hijab and I've been in situations where people have tried to snatch it off my head. And I rushed towards you and I just started screaming, 'Leave him alone! Give me that back!'"

Joe responded, "I don't think we could be any further apart as people. And yet it was just kind of like this common, 'That's not Okay' moment. You are genuinely the only Muslim person I know. I just, it's not that I've actively avoided. I've just never been in the position where I can interact for an extended period of time. So I guess my views on the Muslim community have been influenced by a lot of the news articles and things of that nature."

Continuing on about his experience of getting to know Amina after this moment in 2016, Joe says, "Honestly, it's been, it's been life-changing, I'm genuinely not the same person I was four years ago. I've learned to see through the veneer that people post online or what you assume about people and really try to get beneath the skin and see why do people believe the values that they hold."

Amina and Joe were brought together after this incident at first in 2018 and then again in 2020 by NPR's "Story Corps" podcast, as a part of their One Small Step initiative.¹ One Small Step is an effort to connect people so they can remember that the people with whom they disagree are human beings. In doing this, the program attempts to mend the fraying fabric of our nation—one conversation at a time. The goal is to break down boundaries created by politics and remember our shared humanity. To remind us that we have more in common than divides us and that treating those with whom we disagree with decency and respect is essential.

The Apostle Paul wasn't always so easy to get along with. He's in Athens, after all, because he's been run out of city after city after city. He must have loved a good debate. Now, whether you are a fan of Paul or not, you have to admit that he has some incredible moments of vision and grace.



What Paul does and says next can only be explained by the work of the Spirit. The Spirit wants Paul's audience to hear and receive God's invitation to them. So, Paul's words will join the synagogue and the marketplace, encircling all that regularly visit these sites with the love of God.

"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way," Paul says. These words are no missionary ploy. They present a transformation enacted by the Spirit—Paul is able to turn their logic of idolatry in a different direction. God wants these Gentiles, these idolaters. God longs to embrace God's created by whatever means possible.

What do you say to those radically different from you?

Idolatry was common in the ancient world. In the Old Testament, we read about how God's people in the desert created a golden calf to worship. Israel was surrounded with other cultures and religions who worshiped multiple gods and made altars and idols to venerate. Time and again in Scripture, we hear God tell God's people not to be like the Gentiles who worship false gods and empty idols. When Moses finds God's people worshiping that golden calf in Exodus, he loses it. God warns God's children to stay away from idolatry and idolaters. It's no mystery that it's sinful. And here, in Athens, Paul is literally surrounded by it.

The people of Athens are known for being openminded. Some are curious about what Paul has been saying. Instead of an argumentative, self-righteous Paul, we get a man with some patience and understanding.

Idols are really a collective self-deception, a distorted hope. For the idol facilitates a hope of control of both my life and the life of the gods.ⁱⁱ They are an attempt to define or reign in what is unknowable or uncontrollable. We can sympathize with that need for control and certainty. If the crops are dying or the rain's stopped coming, we must have done something wrong—let's pray to, make a sacrifice to, present an offering to the image of the god of the harvest....

We can imagine the scene. We recognize that Paul knows this is sinful and wrong, but we don't see him fly off the handle and argue on the street corner. Instead, we see him open up his patience. "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way."

The Gentiles are searching. They may not know it yet, but Paul can see they are searching for something more. So, Paul speaks about humanity's search for the Divine and about shared conviction that deities are not contained within temples, statues, or altars. The God Paul proclaims is close by. This is not a God who condemns, but a God who condescends—in the best sense of that word. With the Spirit's work, God is opening the way for Jews and Gentiles alike, drawn and welcomed toward light and life.

Blaise Pascal described what Paul recognized in the Athenians as a craving and a helplessness that somehow senses an emptiness without God. Pascal says that humankind will try to fill this emptiness with anything and everything, but nothing will help, since this "infinite abyss can be filled only with... God himself."



Here is Paul, proclaiming that that “gap” can only be filled by a turning-toward, literally repentance as turning-toward God. Like Peter’s vision earlier in Acts, Paul is experiencing a widening, a broadening of the Kingdom. To be sure, he never departs away from the story of Israel. All this is within the vision. Now, Paul speaks to these Gentiles of the assertive love of God made known in Jesus whose body stands between life and death.

What do you say to those radically different from you?

I have to admit that I avoid a lot of conversation about politics. This past week in particular, I have tried to steer clear of some social media sites, afraid of what I might find.

No one I’ve spoken with—democrat, republican, libertarian, or independent—likes how divided our nation has become. No one wants to live this way anymore. But few have any idea how to bridge the gap.

When Paul was in Athens, some scoffed at his testimony, others were offended, and some responded, “We will hear you again about this.” Whether they agreed or disagreed, those last folks were willing to keep the conversation going. Today, that can be one of the bravest, most counter cultural things we can do: keep the conversation going.

On Monday evening, we held a non-partisan election eve prayer service here at Second. I don’t think our church has ever held one of those before. Perhaps that’s because things have never felt so polarized or volatile—at least in our lifetimes. At the in-person parking lot prayer, we offered little stones to those who gathered. They were simple little pebbles, with four letters embossed on the top: L-O-V-E. These stones were meant to serve as an Ebenezer, a stone of help, a reminder that we are called not to throw stones, but to place our faith on the Rock of our salvation.

In a world where it is easy and expected to judge and categorize people, we could use a reminder to sow love. Perhaps love is what is meant to stand in the gap between me and you—between us and them. Perhaps love is the only thing strong enough to bring healing where there is so much hurt and hate. Perhaps love is what can keep the conversation going.

At our best, Christians have sowed love and followed Paul’s example of sharing the gospel in places of worship and in the marketplace and beyond. At our best, we remember that God “made the world and everything in it,” and that each person we meet is “God’s offspring.” In Paul’s mind, there is no person or sphere of influence outside of God’s care and concern. If we are to believe that’s true, then all of so-called “secular” life, and not just “sacred” realms, are spheres of God’s loving presence. In that sense, every encounter—be it in-person or online—is an opportunity to sow love.

There are a lot of people I love who are devastated by the recent election outcomes. There are a lot of people I love who are overjoyed. If there is anything the suspense of these past days has taught us, it is that we are still a very divided nation.

It is far more easy to argue and disparage and throw stones. It is far more difficult, but so much more worthwhile, to keep the channels of communications open.



So, what do we say to those radically different?

We start by recognizing the other's search for something deeper, for something more. We start by remembering each person is "God's offspring," God's child whom God loves. We start with genuine conversation, and not clickbait memes, soundbites, and headlines.

Amina Amdeen and Joe Weidknecht from *One Small Step* may appear like the most unlikely of friends, but in a moment of vulnerability, they saw past the categories that divided them. Now, they know one another's stories, and they both are changed from the experience.

Paul preaches to the Athenians about resurrection, the real physical resurrection of Jesus. But there are other kinds of resurrection we experience in this life, too. Sometimes, we must die to the old self, the ways of life we've been living—the us vs. them, the red vs. blue—and recognize we are called to plant our being on more solid ground. Rooted and reaching toward light and life, may we sow love, bridge the gap, and remain open to the Spirit.

Thanks to the work of the Spirit, God's presence wasn't a one-time event in the life of Jesus but is ongoing as God keeps showing up in our midst. May we sense God's presence and guidance in our worship, work, and conversations in the days to come. And may we work to sow love in all those places and encounters in between.

ⁱ *One Small Step: The NPR Special, Part 1* (Oct 20, 2020): <https://storycorps.org/podcast/one-small-step-the-npr-special-part-1/>

ⁱⁱ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), Willie James Jennings, 177.

