

“In Him, We Live, Move and Have our Being”

Acts 17: 13-31

It's funny how a text written two thousand years ago still has a relevant and needed message for the Church today. One would assume that certain things lose their value or importance over time due to changes in society and culture but the ironic thing is-the more things change, the more they stay the same.

I say this because the early church who first heard this story was experiencing a very similar cultural context to what we as postmodern believers are experiencing in our world today. Multi-cultural, multi-lingual; multi-belief; multi-religion, multi-racial; multi-ethnic; all rolled up into a human community, trying to live together the best way they know how.

The world context the early church moved and existed in really isn't that much different from our own world context. Sure, technology may be a bit more advanced and our basic way of being may be a little different but just like the early church, we as postmodern believers are still asking the same questions, questions like: “How do we make the Gospel relevant today? How do we help translate the Gospel message so that it becomes meaningful across cultures and across language barriers?”

The church has been asking the same questions since the beginning of the existence of the church, questions like How do we bring more people to Christ?

And once again, we turn to Paul, the great evangelist of the early church to answer these questions.

Now, I want to share a little background about our text today to help us understand Paul's sermon a little better:

The thing we need to realize is that Paul never intended to go to Athens in the first place. It is not like he sat down and planned out his evangelism journey and said, "Well, I can't pass up Athens. It is too much of a hotbed of believers. And it would be a great place to start a church."

In reality, Paul finds himself in Athens by accident. Now, this is where I'm going to shatter everyone's illusions. Most people tend to think preachers know what we are doing most of the time, that there is usually a method to our madness. Well, here is the honest truth: More often than not, some of the best ministry moments are stumbled upon by us church folk by accident. Usually, the most opportune moments for ministry come about when we had no intention of actually doing ministry in that moment in the first place. That's why we always say that it was God's doing and not ours because we know that sometimes the only way things come together is through the grace of God.

And this holds true for Paul in our story today as well. You see, Paul is only in Athens because he was literally run out of town on his last evangelism attempt. He stirred up the powers that be, and Silas and Timothy barely get him out of town in time. And if that wasn't enough, the other men who helped Paul escape got him as far as Athens and then left him there, almost as if he could only pay so much towards the journey and then they dropped him off on the sidewalks when his money ran out. Paul finds himself, stranded, bags and all in a place where he knows no one and certainly didn't know what his next steps should be.

And in this moment, at his lowest of the low, while Paul is waiting for Silas and Timothy to put out the fires in the last stop and to come and get him, all Paul can think was getting out of Athens quick! He certainly wasn't thinking about ministry and he definitely wasn't thinking about spreading the Gospel message. All he cared about was getting back home.

But as we read in our story, that isn't what happen. While Paul was waiting, he did some wandering around the city and he discovered that he was in a fairly spiritual town. Athens was covered with shrines and idols to all sorts of Gods and he even found one that was dedicated to an unknown god. And in that moment, Paul realizes that what he thought of and saw originally as a misfortune was really an opportunity for mission. So he begins to talk to the locals, to find out their customs, and to tell them about Jesus Christ.

Now here is what I love about this text: We all assume that because Paul was Paul, you know great evangelist of the church, that people would listen when he talked. But more often than not, that was the farthest thing from the truth. Usually when Paul shared his faith or talked about Jesus Christ, people either laughed at him, jailed him, or ran him out of town. However, on some occasions while he was sharing his faith, some people actually believed in him. And as we see this time his evangelism attempt brought the similar mixed results.

Some people dismissed him. Some people called him names while others were intrigued by what he was saying. So this last group invited Paul to speak some more about his experience with his God and they gave Paul the opportunity to tell his story, not just in the streets but in the Areopagus, the place where all gathered to hear the great speakers of their time. So here in Athens, Paul has a captive audience and now it is his time to share the Gospel message with this community.

Now as I've said before, what I love about this text is that we all assume because Paul was Paul, that people would listen. We assume that because Paul was Paul, you know great evangelist, that he would wow people with his words, inspire them with his passion, and convince people that they would need to come to Christ. We assume that because Paul was Paul, he would hold some great revival,

do a little pulpit pounding and people would come flocking in just because Paul was Paul, you know the great evangelist of the church.

But as we learn in our text today, that is simply not the case. Our text today is actually one of Paul's more concise and complete sermons that he gave during his evangelism ministry and let's be honest: It is not at all fancy or pulpit pounding. It is not colorful. There's not even hell fire and damnation. In fact, overall, Paul's speech is not even really memorable.

In this sermon that he gave to Athens, a place of Socrates and Plato, a place of great thinkers and philosophers, in this sermon that Paul shares with Athens, he barely wows or captivates. He simply tells it like it is. He shares his Gospel message as he has experienced it. He shares the faith that has shaped him and helped him become the person that God created him to be. In that moment, when Paul could bring the crowd to their knees, Paul simply says a few barely even memorable words.

Now, as postmodern believers, we would say that in that moment, Paul failed. We would say that Paul wasn't a very good preacher. And we might even go as far as saying that Paul blew his shot at the big leagues. But we would all be wrong in our statements and assumptions.

Because, you see, for Paul, sharing the Gospel isn't all flash and glimmer and it certainly isn't rocket science. It is simply about finding common ground and trusting God to do the rest.

And here's why: The thing that Paul remembers and the thing that the early church and we as postmodern believers have tended to forget is that it is not our job to bring people to Christ, arm-twisting and dragging them as we go. Our job is to build the bridges so that Jesus can walk across.

Paul realizes and the thing that we as the Church need to remember today and always is that the Gospel message will always always translate. It will always always cross cultural and language barriers. The Gospel will always always bring people together because that is simply its nature. The Gospel message is powerful enough in itself. The Gospel message really at its core is simply about God working in this world to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth for the people of God. The Gospel message at its very basic level is simply about letting all of God's children know that they are loved more than they could ever imagine. And, believe me, that translates and comes across, no matter what culture, language or belief.

By sharing his very basic, no frills attached speech in Athens, Paul is proudly proclaiming to the group gathered there, proclaiming to the early church,

proclaiming to us as postmodern believers, that the thing we need to remember is that the Gospel message will always be relevant for one simple fact: everyone regardless of context, regardless of time period, regardless of race, culture or ethnicity, everyone regardless of social class, everyone wants and needs to know that God's grace is more than enough to make them whole once more.

That's what Paul knows and what we tend to forget in our push to bring people to Christ. Our job is not to twist arms or drag people to God. Our job is to create opportunities so that others can experience God's grace and God's love as part of their every day lives. And the way we do this is by sharing our faith through our words and our actions.

Paul realizes that his misfortune lead him to Athens if for no other reason but to remind him and us that it is always a good time, it is always an opportune time, it is always the right time to share the good news of God's grace and love with everyone we meet. We don't need a special invitation to speak to large crowds. We don't need flashy words or gimmicks to get the message across.

We simply need to be authentic and real in our relationship with God and with others. We simply need to live out the love and grace that God first showed to us in our lives. We simply need to be the disciples of Christ that Jesus showed us and taught us to be.

You see, that's where we've gotten it wrong as the Church. We tend to think that we need to bring people to Christ, kicking and screaming if we have to because it is up to us to save their souls. Or we bring them to Christ, for an even more selfish reason, we need more bottoms in our pews. But in reality our job, our mission, our calling as the Church, as disciples of Christ is to love the children of God the way God first loved us and then simply trust God to do the rest. We are called to simply sow the seeds. We are called to simply tell the story. We are called to simply build the bridges so that Jesus can walk across.

That's the secret to Paul's evangelism success. He simply shared his experience of how God transformed his life and trusted God to do the rest. In all his efforts of evangelism, his first thoughts when he entered into a community didn't turn to how many more bottoms could he get in the pews. His first thoughts were not about sustaining buildings or providing programs.

When Paul first entered into a community, his first thoughts were about finding a place where he could share his experience of God's transforming love and grace with the people, knowing that the Holy Spirit would take care of the rest.

Paul understood that the Gospel message is powerful enough in itself, that he didn't need to add bells and whistles to it to persuade people to listen it or respond to it. God can do that on God's own. All he had to do was be in the community,

sharing his experience of God's transforming love and grace, inviting others to experience it as well, and trusting that God will take care of the rest. And the same holds true for us today as well.

We need to realize that Paul's secret to his success as the great evangelist didn't come from a 12 easy step manual to church growth that he kept in his luggage on his travels. His success was due for the most part because of his understanding that God transformed his life and he simply couldn't stop talking about it. He was passionate about it. He lived it. He breathed it. It pushed him on his travels.

Nowadays, unlike Paul, we as postmodern day believers don't have this sense of urgency that Paul had when he was out spreading the Gospel. Paul's sense of urgency came from the fact that he thought and believed that Jesus was coming back like tomorrow and he needed to get out and spread the word to as many people as he could before that happened. He understood that the Gospel message was too good to be kept quiet. That is what drove him in his ministry. That is what gave him passion for the journey.

But eventually time has passed and it became clear that Jesus didn't come back as soon as Paul expected him to do so. And when that event didn't happen, that sense of urgency went away, never to come back to the wider Church again.

In all of our evangelism efforts as the modern day Church, we still don't know when Jesus is coming back and because of that, there really isn't this sense of urgency to spread the Gospel message. As believers, we tend to hold to the promise that Jesus will come back as a good thing but it doesn't drive us like Paul.

As I have thought about this lack of urgency in us as believers, I have come to realization that this is another place where we gotten it wrong in our evangelism efforts as well. We tend to say Oh, I'm uncomfortable sharing my faith or Oh, that's somebody else's gift. We tend to assume that there is always another day or another way to let people know about God's grace and love. We tend to be too quiet about the good stuff God has done for us.

But as I lived with this text this week, I have come to realization that we as the Church need to reclaim the urgency of the Gospel if we are going to survive. I say this not to alarm everyone but for no other fact than that we should all be anxious for that day when the Kingdom of God is realized here on earth, a day where there will be no more hunger, no more war, no more divisions and barriers. We should be out there sharing the Good news through our actions and words if for no other fact, than that the sooner everyone has an opportunity to experience God's grace and love, the sooner God's Kingdom will be realized here on earth. I want that for my children and for my children's children. I want the Kingdom of God to

realized here on earth and it is not going to happen if I keep quiet about my God and how God's love and grace have transformed me and made me whole.

Now before, everyone gets uncomfortable and starts thinking I want us all to stand on the street corner, shouting that the end is coming, what I'm saying is that our efforts at evangelism don't need to be about bringing people to Christ, twisting arms or dragging them kicking and screaming as we go. Our efforts at evangelism simply need to be about sharing our experience of how God transformed our lives and how that experience is helping us become the person God created us to be. Our efforts at evangelism simply need to be about creating opportunities wherever we may go or find ourselves, creating opportunities for God's grace and God's love to come through, using words if we have to.

As postmodern believers who have experienced the Risen Lord in our own lives, our efforts at evangelism should be exactly like Paul's, sharing the story of our God who loves us more than we could imagine and who calls us to share that love with others through our words and our actions. We don't need a special invitation to do that. We just need to be the disciples of Christ that Jesus showed us and taught us to be.

Our job, our calling, our mission as disciples of Christ is simply to sow the seeds of God's Kingdom wherever we go and trust that God take care of the rest.

Now, I know this is the time in the sermon that would be great for a really good illustration to explain just exactly how we should do this but in my search this week, I came up with nothing...

Not because there aren't stories out there about how people did this but simply because I was overwhelmed by the many ways people do sow the seeds of God's Kingdom while trusting God to do the rest. There were so many my brain shut down. And as my brain recovered from its overload, I realized that was exactly the point.

There is not just one way to share our faith or spread the Gospel message. God is going to use whatever means necessary to get the message across, sometimes even using us to do so.

All we need to know is that The Gospel message will always translate. It will always remain relevant because that is simply its nature. We don't need to make it harder or complicate more than it really is. We just need to create opportunities for people to hear it and experience it themselves. And then God will take care of the rest. We just need to be the disciples of Christ that Jesus showed us and taught us to be.

So let's leave this place always ready to sow the seeds of God's Kingdom
wherever we go and whatever situation we might find ourselves in because who
knows, someone might listen and believe. Amen.