

Sermon for May 21, 2017 – “Retaking Mars Hill”

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A – Texts: Acts 17:16-34; John 14:15-21

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When we think about Paul, what comes to mind? I'd say that for the most part we tend to think about his epistles, after all, they make up about a third of the New Testament. Not surprisingly, we tend to pay particular attention to the major ones. His letters to the churches in places like Corinth, Galatia, and Rome are some of the most important Christian documents in existence. They tell an amazing story of faithful persistence and outline key principles of faith that define our tradition to this day. The problem though, at times, is his tone. Experts describe Paul as often being argumentative and combative, often “reinforcing his argument with reprimands, irony, [and] threats.” You might wonder just how Paul was able to spread the good news of gospel so effectively and bring so many to faith.

But, in the Book of Acts we find (for the most part) a “different” sort of Paul. Here we encounter a respectful, intelligent, and courageous, I'd even say clever, apologist for the faith. In our first reading, Paul is in Athens where he's waiting for Silas and Timothy. As Paul wanders around the public spaces of the city he's disturbed by all the idols he sees. He begins conversations about this; first in the synagogue, but then in the marketplace with different philosophers. In the course of these dialogues he begins to preach about Jesus. Some of the Athenians label him a babbler while others say, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” Now this second charge doesn't seem too serious to us, does it? Not to us who live in a society with freedoms of speech and religion. However, the Athens of Paul's time was a different place. Five hundred years prior, a guy by the name of Socrates (yes, **that** Socrates) was accused of the very same charge, proclaiming foreign divinities. He was tried at the Areopagus, in English, “Mars Hill.” He was convicted and sentenced to death by drinking a cup containing poison hemlock. Paul faces the same charge and brought to the same place. So, this isn't some light interfaith debate here. Paul is risking his life before a deadly serious crowd by proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to people suspicious of new teachings. (Trust me, the Greeks weren't as open-minded as we've been led to believe!) Amazingly, not only does he leave the Areopagus alive, some of his listeners say that they'd like to hear more. And, more amazing still, some of them actually join him and became believers! Seems pretty clear to me that Paul accomplished something quite remarkable in the highest court of Athenian public opinion. How did this happen?

The key, I believe, is in how Paul begins his sermon at the Areopagus. This is why I consider Paul so clever. He says: “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” He then relates how he walked the city and looked carefully at the objects of their worship. Perhaps by recognizing the value of their spiritual practices, respecting their culture, and understanding their context, Paul was able to find a way to get the Athenians to receive a message about Jesus Christ. He found a way to cause them to say, “We would hear you again about this.” We Christians need to pay attention to what Paul accomplished at the Areopagus and how he engaged the Athenians.

In the 21st century Christendom's been declared dead. Christian cultural values are no longer the undisputed norm. Mainline Protestants no longer dominate American political life. The fastest growing religious affiliation is “none.” Fewer and fewer people attend church regularly, and even fewer are actually joining churches. So, I wonder, can we admit that maybe we need to find new ways to engage people?

It shouldn't be all that hard to imagine ourselves in Paul's place proclaiming Christ before a new Areopagus. In 2005, Pope John Paul II wrote a papal letter. In it, he identifies the situation of the church in the world with the one Paul faced at the Areopagus. In the letter, John Paul II wrote about the challenges the church faces in proclaiming the gospel message and doing so in an increasingly complex world. He stated that "that the first Areopagus of modern times is the world of communications, "Capable of unifying humanity and transforming it into 'a global village'". He warned that because of rapid advances in communications, and the rise of the internet, the world had changed drastically. He noted the dramatic shift in the way people engage society and one another and believed; and for that reason, the Church needs to find new ways to relate to people and proclaim the gospel message. The letter was prophetic because it came almost a full year before Facebook was available to a general public. Today, one in ten clicks on the internet is on Facebook. I think John Paul was right. I think the Christian church today is faced with an Areopagus moment. I think we need to pay attention to this. Right now on Facebook, Twitter and other social media, conversations are taking place. Conversations about truth and meaning, about God and faith. Maybe even worse, there are far too many places where these conversations are **not** taking place. Places where the idols to unknown gods of this post-modern world have been erected. Places where "sacrifices" are offered continuously. Places where Christ is being tried in the court of public opinion and the jury comes back with a decision of "irrelevant." So, we have some decisions of our own to make; some important choices to consider. Do we continue with our old ways of being, talking, relating our ways of being church? Or dare we risk trying something new? Can we find new ways to think about our faith, talk about it, live it? What if we did? We can't know for sure. But we'll **never** know unless we try.

Christianity, it seems, is thriving everywhere **except** the US and Europe. If you look at a list of the top 20 countries where Christianity is growing, several things stand out. Not one country from Europe, North or Latin America is on it, nineteen are in Asia (particularly Korea) and Africa, eleven (of those nineteen) are majority Muslim. In 1907, North American missionaries were working to spread the message of Jesus Christ all across the Korean peninsula, mostly to poor communities. But, something surprising happened there. During a revival in Pyongyang (now the capitol of North Korea) a new kind of prayer developed called "Tongsung Kido". "Prayer aloud together" is the closest English translation and it's a jumble of voices all praying at once. People crying out in anguish and violent throes of emotion. This cacophony of voices as prayer was unfamiliar to the missionaries. Not surprisingly, it was quite shocking. Even more surprising was the fact that they did not discourage it; instead, they encouraged it and bore witness to it! These missionaries served as witnesses. Witnesses to a new movement of the Spirit among Korean Christians. Not shying away from it, not labeling it as heresy. These missionaries allowed the gospel message to be conveyed in a new and different way. Could those missionaries have imagined what was to come? Maybe. Maybe not. But imagine how different things might've been if they'd discouraged it? If they'd dismissed the possibility of this new engagement of Korean culture and Christian faith in prayer; if they'd maybe tried to shut it down?

So, what about us? The challenge has already been laid. How are we going to learn to spread the gospel to a world that communicates, relates, and lives differently from any other before it? If we're to follow Paul's example at the Areopagus, what should we do? I wish I had all the answers, but there are a few things I do know. First and foremost, I know, as I said last week, that we need to stop apologizing for our faith, worrying that we might offend someone. Second, I believe that we as a church need to spend time understanding those around us in our communities, and some of these new forms of communications. Now, we've actually begun to do that; actually, the Mission team has, and we've had some success. But we need to recognize that we're not just looking to find some new, clever ways to recruit new members. This is more

than just a new, better marketing strategy because the people out there, especially the “un-churched”, are more than just warm bodies to bolster our membership or giving units to be tapped as a source of funds to help close our budget deficits. For one, because when comes to social media people are probably a lot savvier than we realize, and they’ll probably see right through our shallow attempts to reach them. Unfortunately, there’s no shortcut here. Then, as now, the Christian faith is about **relationships**. If we’re to have any hope of “winning” them we’ll need to do the hard work of really getting to know them. We’ll need to earnestly engage them for the sake of truly understanding how they live and what matters to them. I’ve believed for some time now that people still long for truth. They still need to find answers to the important, deeper questions of life. They need the good news that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, but unless we’re willing to spend time with them, engage them, they’ll remain strangers possibly to us and probably to Jesus as well.

Here we come to the third thing that I believe needs to happen if we’re to follow Paul’s example in our modern-day Areopagus, which is that as we must commit fully to **real engagement** with people who identify themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” I think it means doing so even if it means risking some of our relationships and losing the church as we’ve come to know and love it. Paul dialogue with the Athenians was not without risk. Quite the contrary, the text makes it clear that Paul was willing to risk his life. And, as it happens, our Book of Order calls us “to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God even at the risk of losing its life.” No one says this was, or is, going to be easy. I’m not sure it’s supposed to be. When we look around we see that a lot has changed. New challenges have presented themselves both inside and outside the church, often in drastic, unsettling ways. I think that it would be disingenuous to think otherwise; the proof is all around us. So, if that’s the case, doesn’t it make sense that what we do to meet those challenges needs to change too? I think it was Albert Einstein who said that the “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results.” Let me be clear, I’m not looking to “re-invent the wheel” here nor is this about change for its own sake, but even a decade ago nearing his own end, John Paul II understood how drastically the world was changing. His challenge to the church to adapt, learn, change says something. It says that he knew that the Church could no longer remain what it’d always been, not if it was to be what our desperate, broken world would need it to be. This is the message we of our reading here and now. It’s that unless we’re willing to approach and engage those around us with real understanding, respect, and humility, unless we’re willing to risk all we **have** and all we **are** to meet people where they are and speak to them in ways they can understand, we cannot be faithful to our call to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to go and make disciples of all nations, to be His image-bearers. Starting with those around us, people we know, people we encounter every day. But, this is just the tip of the iceberg. So, here’s my question...Are we content to continue being the church we’ve always been? Doing what we’ve always done, the way we’ve always done them? Or can we maybe trust in God enough to be open to maybe looking at new ways of thinking about things? New ways of doing and being church? New ways of organizing ourselves? Can we find new ways of engaging one another and encouraging them to get involved in the life and ministry of the church? New ways of engaging the community?

We’ve made great progress in the last few years, but I believe there’s more to be done. There always will be! And, as we move into the process, we might feel like we’re in danger of losing parts of who we’ve been or crossing lines that we never wanted to even approach. But, if we can be open to work together to discern where God’s Spirit might be leading us, like the Korean missionaries, like Paul, if we can exhibit that kind of courage and conviction then

I believe that anything's possible. I believe that people will say, "We would hear you again about this."

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.