

People of Peace  
Part 5 - Entering Someone Else's World  
Acts 17:16-34

Jim Zazzera, Faith Presbyterian Church, 28 February 2016

On the weekdays I drive to the church on Highway 50 from Rancho Cordova at about 8:00 in the morning. As I make my way here, I drive under several overpasses and almost every time I come to church I see a man on one particular overpass who stands there in a baseball cap and wears a day glow green t-shirt. On his shirt is emblazoned "John 3:16." Every day I pass under him, he simply smiles and waves to me and to the cars below. I am certain this man is very committed to his task and I am sure he spends hours each day waving, smiling, and having hundreds of cars see the scripture reference "John 3:16"

But if I am honest, I must tell you that something bugs me about him. You see, I know the scripture reference as most of you do, and I am a bit offended that he is trying to remind me of God's love when he doesn't know a thing about me. He has no idea whether I am having a good or bad day, whether I am a Christian or not, whether I know what the phrase "John 3:16" means. He has no idea whether I have questions about God, whether I know English, whether I am and healthy or sick or whether I am poor or rich.

He is trying to give me a message that I am sure he sees as life changing. He spends hours of his life offering this news yet he doesn't care to really encounter me or to know me. Perhaps some of you know this man or at least someone like him. I don't doubt the depth of his faith. I am certain sure my comments say a lot more about me than about him. But when I see him smiling and waving from the overpass it just triggers something not nice in me.

You see, I don't want to be offered God's love like I'm being sold Bud Light, or allergy medication, or a cell phone plan. If this is such an important message, I want it to come from someone who takes time to know me and understand my life.

The past four weeks, we have been talking about those who are people of peace in our lives, about people we know, people who are open to us, and might want to know about the God we love and serve. In Jeff's sermons from the past few weeks we have talked about God's call to us—and how we might offer people our genuine, loving, welcoming presence. We have talked about how God opens up opportunities with those whom we have both *passing* and *permanent* relationships. We have talked about how God's power is at work in people's lives long before we ever show up.

Today, I want to talk about our "perception" of these people of peace. What do we perceive, what do we know about people's lives? How much do we know about those whom God places in our path? What is their life situation? Are they hungry for spiritual things? Who are the important people in their lives? What is the world in which they live? (Even if they live next door...)

The story before us today is a powerful example of someone seeking to really understand the lives of his hearers. We just read an excerpt from the book of Acts, a book by Luke that could be called a “biography” of the early church.

In today’s reading, Paul the apostle (great preacher that he is) is speaking in a context that to him is strange and unfamiliar. Here in Acts 17, he enters a world that is not typical for him. Paul is not discussing with Jews (as he usually did) who had some knowledge of the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings—the Jewish Bible. He is not speaking here with Christians who might have seen Jesus personally or at least heard first hand reports about him. He is not in the comfortable and familiar confines of the Holy City of Jerusalem but in the worldly, polytheistic, diverse city of Athens, Greece.

After some previous encounters in Athens, Paul is invited to speak at a place called the “Areopagus,” which translated from the Greek means “Mars Hill.” The Areopagus is a rocky high place just to the west of the Acropolis in Athens. The word “Areopagus” also refers to a body of people who met there, a council of leading citizens in that day, a group that spent no small amount of time in discussion and debate about the issues of the day.

Scripture tells us Paul was “deeply distressed” about Greek spirituality and its many idols, its many Gods, and the story tells us his listeners talked about Paul as a “babbling.” Yet when Paul comes to Mars Hill, he sets all this aside and shares with a gracious spirit and in fact his audience welcomes him and listens with careful attention. You could almost call this story one of the earliest pictures of inter-religious dialogue.

Listen carefully to what Paul says in his sermon here and how he says it. He begins in verse 22, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way...” Paul notices the spirituality of the Athenians and affirms it. He acknowledges their spiritual hunger. He doesn’t start by stating what he believes or giving them answers to questions they never asked.

Paul continues in verse 23, “I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship...” He is a careful observer of not only Greek ideas but also of their religious practices. Though it is clear to us he does not agree with these practices, he doesn’t condemn them out of hand or start with a critique. Paul pays attention to how the Athenians live and worship.

Later in the sermon Paul shares ideas that would connect with Greek thinkers—Stoics, Epicureans, and others. He speaks of “The God who made the world and everything in it...” (vs 24) He describes how, “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth...” (vs 26) Paul reminds his hearers that we are all “God’s offspring,” (vs. 29) and though the Jewish-Christian perspective on these themes would be a bit different from that of Paul’s Greek listeners, he is clearly seeking to speak in the language and thought forms of the Greek world.

When I have considered this passage in the past, I used to think Paul was simply humoring his Greek audience that day, that perhaps he was just making a cursory connection to their beliefs. But on closer inspection I am convinced that Paul is opening up to real dialogue. He is clearly taking a risk here. Paul is really entering the thought world and belief systems of his hearers. Entering someone else's world is always a risk. But that is what this story is about.

Many of you know that Lena and I like to travel, and when we do travel we like to do more than just look out the window of the bus at the pretty sights or shop for souvenirs. In 2010, Lena and I visited Istanbul, Turkey and decided that this was the perfect time to experience a "Turkish Bath."

Now I am a shy, introverted person, not all that at home with my body and a Turkish bath was not exactly something I was "itching" to do. Yet Lena and I figured we had to fully immerse ourselves (pun intended) in the culture and history of Turkey. So we set out for the historic Cemberlitas Hamam. Constructed in 1584, it reflects the history of Istanbul and is still an active and popular bath house for both tourists and locals.

Entering the hamam really felt like entering a different world, with its ancient aches and its humid atmosphere. Once I found the dressing room, stripped myself of my clothing, and put on the pestemal (towel) and slippers, I had to figure out how to remove my key (which did not want to come out the dressing room door). The next challenge was finding where to go from there, and I thought if I stood around and looked confused enough I would be directed to the main bath. Sure enough, someone ultimately pointed me in the right direction.

Once I got to the main bath, I looked at what everyone else was doing, and laid myself on the center warming stone in the beautiful ancient structure and waited for the man who would come and bathe me. Sure enough, the man came over to me and with a combination of pointing and broken English and Turkish I got fully clean and rinsed.

Though I was refreshed there was still one more confusion. How do you give a tip to a man with only a towel wrapped around himself, and where do you keep a tip when you are half naked yourself? Needless to say – I will do a bit better next time I enter the world of the Turkish bath, and maybe next time I will know enough to find it a bit more relaxing!

Now maybe you have entered into other worlds yourself. You probably know don't have to travel half way around the world to do it, Just sit down with a three year old and play with his trucks for hours on end. Or tag along with a friend to a concert where the music is WAY outside your comfort zone. Visit your grandmother in a hospital even though it seems like the scariest place on earth to you. Have a meal with someone of a different race or culture and talk about your growing up experiences. Perhaps take an art class with your husband and risk being made fun of by those who are a bit more adept with a paint brush. Visit a mosque with a coworker and have a long conversation about what makes Islam important to her.

We can do these things when someone is a person of peace to us. We can enter their world. But entering someone else's world is not an easy task, even if you are just having a bit of fun, even if you feel perfectly safe. Entering someone else's world is always a risk.

Paul the apostle entered a different world in Athens that day. But he was no tourist looking for Greek souvenirs. Paul had a larger purpose than an interesting cultural experience. And while he entered into the world of Greek thought and religion, he was also faithful to his commitment to Jesus the Christ.

While Paul shows appreciation of the Greek inscription "to an unknown God," he reminds his hearers, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you...(vs 23). While Paul quotes a Greek poet who wrote, "In him we live and move and have our being," he is fully prepared to share what has been revealed to him about the God he knows in Jesus. Paul enters the world of his listeners, but seeks to communicate his own faith and life in the language of their world.

In fact, the end of his sermon, while reflective of Greek ways of thinking, clearly climaxes with a message that was nowhere present among the Stoics, the Epicureans, Greek religion, or the people of the Areopagus. Paul, perhaps sensing he had earned the right to be heard, perhaps knowing that he had truly entered the world of the Athenians, offers these words,

*While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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." (vss. 30-31)*

These words of repentance, judgement, and resurrection would not have found their home in Greek philosophy and Paul believed they could only be experienced because God has revealed them to us in Jesus the Christ. In speaking before the Areopagus, Paul was gracious. Paul spoke in language and thought forms that his hearers could understand. He risked entering a different world, but he offered the heart of the Christian message in a bold and clear way.

You can guess that Paul was not universally celebrated with these remarks. In fact, based on the response he received, some scholars have said that this sermon and Paul's ministry in Athens were a failure. But I disagree.

Listen to how the story ends:

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

Some scoffed. They rejected his message. Some said, "We will hear you again." Some believed. Isn't that just like life? This feels so real to me. What do we really expect? People

walk away from us all the time, for all sorts of reasons. Why should we expect anything different? Following Christ is hard, I am actually more suspicious of someone who decides to believe in Jesus too quickly or too easily.

Some people stick around. Some listen. Some hear us again. In part they stick around because we have really entered their world. We have loved them whatever they believe. We yearn for them to discover God's presence in their lives, but we don't make that a condition of our love. To love people only because we want them to accept Christ is not really love at all. We just love. We just enter their world.

Some people do believe and give their lives to Christ. This is the biggest miracle. This is the biggest surprise. Because this is God's doing alone.

Paul talked to the Athenians about all the things they could discover with their own wisdom and philosophy. He understood and affirmed that their thinking could only take them so far. Then he ended his sermon with a message that couldn't be discovered in the natural world but is only known because it was revealed by God in the person of Jesus the Christ. This is why belief is not about us at all. Belief in Christ is first and last only God's doing.

So let me leave you with this: entering someone else's world can be challenging, joyful, frightening, embarrassing, humiliating, and energizing all at the same time! But entering someone else's world is what we are called to do. That is how we communicate the good news that God loves us. That is what we are called to do if we are to truly love the people of peace in our lives.

May we all find ourselves invited to our own Areopagus, our own Mars Hill. And when we find it, may we have the grace and wisdom to speak words of love and hope.

Amen.

Next Step Questions  
2-28-2016

1. Read Acts 17:16-34 again. What draws your attention? What do you find surprising?
2. Have you every had the experience of being in another culture? What about it was uncomfortable for you? What did you do to make yourself feel at home?
3. Paul sought to demonstrate to the Athenians that he understood them. In what way did he do this? Have you ever felt really listened to and understood? Who did this? How do they do it?
4. What are the dangers of Christianity embracing ways of thinking and acting that are embedded in a culture? What are the benefits of doing so?
5. Paul sensed a search for God in Athens. Where do you sense a search for God in our world?
6. Paul reminded his readers there was much about God to be learned from the natural world. He also reminded them that there are things that we can only learn when they are revealed to us by God. What are they? Do you agree? Are you willing to share those things with “people of peace” in your life?
7. Is there a way of entering another person’s world without compromising that which is most important to you about faith or life? What does that look like?
8. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. What do you think Paul meant when he said, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” (vs. 22) How does that relate to the story we read in Acts today?