

An Unknown god, a Sovereign God, a Fixed day
May 29, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Acts: 17-22-31

One of the great issues before us as people of God is how we relate the conviction of our faith in a time and place of many faiths. How do we claim Christ in our religiously pluralistic world and, at the same time, remain in relationship and conversation with others of contrasting or even contradicting claims?

As a practice, we Christians haven't done this well through history. One example that comes quickly is the bloody Crusades of the Roman Catholic church against Muslims in the Holy Land 1,000 years ago. Not our finest hour.

But there are plenty of other examples, right up to present day. Last week I saw a bumper sticker on an SUV proving that we Americans have a ways to go yet. "The Koran," it said, "Now available in two-ply." And we wonder why we have problems in the Mideast.

Today about three out of four Americans identify themselves as Christians though fewer practice their faith. We see our country advancing steadily toward a more religiously diverse future. If nothing else, our children need to know how to build positive relationships with people of other faiths, relationships that can strike that fine balance of respect and integrity. If they are to learn that, they will learn it from us.

Look around and it seems as if there are two prevailing approaches to interfaith dialogue. The first is a critique of the other person's understanding of the Divine. There is something deep within us that moves first to poke holes in the other worldview. This tendency rises quickly, perhaps a result of that fight or flight instinct that has shaped our evolution from the primordial ooze.

It goes something like this. You say you like the color blue and I say I like the color red. My reaction is to tell you all the reasons that the color blue is a lousy color. What stance are you most likely to take? That of a defensive posture. You counter by over-emphasizing all the arguments for the color blue and it goes downhill from there. Tit for tat. Your word against mine. We part ways, perhaps on bad terms, and we never get around to discussing the pros and cons of the color red. What have we achieved? Very little indeed.

There is another way, of course. Rather than attacking your favorite color, I might share with you why I like the color red – how it makes me feel when I see it in the sunset or a rose or roadster. This approach is really what sales is all about. How many books, after all, have been written on the subject of “how to sell anything.”

So, why don't we do that with religion? We do, I suppose. That's what we call evangelism. But, when it comes to inter-faith dialogue, it seems we see more examples of attack than invitation.

Perhaps we could learn a thing or two from the apostle Paul.

That name may stir mixed emotions and reactions. I get that. There is no question that Paul contributed to Christianity in unparalleled ways and has brought millions to a deeper understanding of God and faith. At the same, Paul's letters and those written in his tradition contain some of the most divisive and off-putting passages of scripture. Among them, outdated instructions about marriage or the roles of the genders in the church and in society. It's so important that we look at those in their historical context, which can put them in an entirely different and more understandable light.

Paul was, as he called us all, acting as an ambassador for God in Christ across a range of cultures and settings, political arenas and religious traditions. In today's scripture, we find a primer for interfaith engagement that builds up relationships rather than tearing them down.

While he could be imposing at times, this morning's passage shows Paul's use of invitation rather than confrontation. Paul is like masterful attorney or debate champion making a compelling closing argument. In seven verses, he politely acknowledges how the Athenians cover all their bets by worshipping every kind of god. He paints a portrait of a sovereign but intimate God. He then gently closes his speech with a promise of God's judgment on a “fixed day,” which is something we've heard about ourselves here lately.

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In the context of the New Testament, today's passage comes in the earliest days of the Christian movement. Peter and Paul have emerged as the leaders of Christ's followers. In the town of Berea, Paul had found himself surrounded by an angry mob of folks who didn't like what he was preaching, so his friends slipped him out on a boat to Athens.

There, waiting for Peter to catch up with him, Paul engaged the intellectual leaders in deep conversation about religion.

Paul's talk of God in Christ intrigued them. His story about Jesus and the resurrection drew them in. "That's an interesting slant on things," they said. "Tell us more."

"Well," Paul said, "Since I arrived here, I've noticed how religious you all are. You have many shrines to many gods. You even have a shrine dedicated to "THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS. You are a people who love ideas and knowledge almost more than life itself. So, let me introduce you to this God so you can know more."

Do you hear the invitation? Do you see Paul's diplomacy? He doesn't trash the people of Athens for handling their religion like you and I might invest in a mutual fund, betting on a portfolio of gods to diversify their holdings and avoid downside risk. Nor does he necessarily compliment them. He recognizes a teachable moment when he sees it. He simply meets them where they are, without judgment, and takes them by the hand on a walk from a group of gods with a little "g" to see the nature of the One God with a capital "G."

After recognizing how religious the Athenians strive to be, Paul tries to re-channel their faithful, if misdirected ways. He says that they can't see or serve God in a shrine or an idol. Indeed, God doesn't need anything that the Athenians can do for God. As the creator and the master of the universe, the Lord's existence and providence don't require whatever small efforts they might offer.

This idea echoes what the Reformed faith calls the "sovereignty of God" or the "priority" of God. In plain English, Paul is saying that everything, everything is about God. Remember Bill Clinton's successful campaign slogan, "It's the economy stupid?" If Clinton had been a preacher rather than a politician (maybe we ought not take that idea too far), but if he had been a preacher, he might have said, "It's about God, stupid."

When we speak of our faith, God is the subject of the sentence, as I've said before. God is the initiator of everything, even when we can't see how or why. We play a part in the play, but the story is God's story. I've always been fond of the statement that, in life, there are no un-theological questions. All things, all questions can orient us to the pursuit of how God is working out God's will over the span of God's time, which is a very, very long time indeed.

Paul then moves quickly to make an important, albeit humbling, point, for the Athenians then and for us today. Life with God is in part a mystery. God's people will always seek

God because that is how we are made. But, at times, we search and grope for God, Paul says, just as Israel did for thousands of years.

How true that is. God wouldn't be sovereign if we could capture and keep God in a jar like a lightning bug. Life with God means letting go of our need for control or a full understand of this side of our walk with the Divine.

But by putting our faith in such a God, we claim a God of possibilities. As Frederick Buechner said, "To say that God is a mystery is to say that you can never nail him down. Even on Christ the nails proved ultimately ineffective." This same God, Paul tells the Athenians, is not removed from our comings and goings. Indeed, in this God, we live and move and have our being. God is the all-encompassing Spirit. Nothing in the cosmos is outside God's possibilities.

So, Paul says, it's just as one of your poets has written. We are God's children. And if we are created by God, we cannot create God, no matter how smart we think we are or how much gold and bronze we can mold into our image of God.

As Paul continues his appeal to the Athenians, he slowly, carefully follows the classic rhetorical pattern of an inverted pyramid. He starts out broadly and works his way to a point. And there is a point. Paul is anything but a universalist. But there is one universal aspect to his message. All, *all* are called to give up their earthly, man- idols, all those false gods with little "g's" and turn their faith and their hope to the one true God with a big G.

And, yes, Paul told the Athenians, there is a fixed day when we will stand accountable before our creator. I suppose you would have had to have been raptured already to not know about radio preacher Harold Camping's call for the rapture to take place last Saturday. After missing his bet, he finally came out of hiding last week and explained that he had miscalculated. He now expects doomsday to come in October

Camping's miscalculations, of course, provided endless fodder for light-hearted jokes and snarky comments. God's truth wasn't well served last Saturday. Still, at the expected hour of tribulation that day, I bowed my head and prayed that all of Camping's dismayed followers might be reoriented to Christ's guidance no one will know the day or the hour when we will see the kingdom of God.

Whenever that day does come, Paul tells the Athenians, all will be judged but we will be judged by the embodiment of God's own grace, Jesus the Christ, who in his resurrection

has robbed death of its sting and called us to live as he taught – lives of gentleness, generosity and justice.

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On the Presbyterian Church USA worship calendar, today is set aside as Presbyterian Heritage Sunday. No doubt, some of our denominational sisters and brothers in other places are looking back 500 years. They are kirking their Scottish tartans and celebrating John Calvin, John Knox and other great reformers. Heritage has its place.

But on this Presbyterian Heritage Sunday we might also look forward and be reminded of our inclination to over-use our intellect to get our message across. Too often, out of our conviction, we end up bludgeoning others with doctrine and dogma, even when we don't mean for that to be the effect.

Sometimes the “what” of our witness is amplified by the “how” of our witness. Paul's witness in the Areopagus reminds us of the power of hospitality and a gracious welcome. In the Athenians, Paul recognized that yearning for God that is innate in all of us, what he called a probing for God that is part of being a child of God. We want to believe in something larger than ourselves.

In our day, we have more and more opportunity to interact with people of other faiths – or even of other Christian worldviews. We might follow Paul's example. Paul didn't shy away from his understanding of the truth, but he shared it in a way that left room for others. Rather than trying to suffocate his listeners by taking the oxygen out of every alternative view, Paul simply shared the truth as he had come to know it in his experience.

That is the story of Paul throughout Acts. Time and again he offers a faithful witness. In return, he was run out of town about as often as he was welcomed. But wherever he went he met people where they were. He offered his yes to God in Christ rather than clubbing others with his no to their understanding.

What does it mean, we might ask ourselves, to be so fully rooted and grounded in the truth as we know it that we can comfortably, kindly and hospitably invite others into an exchange of truth about God without feeling that we have to give up anything?

Amen.