

For Private Distribution Only

Today’s scripture reading finds the apostle Paul pretty much of a tourist in Athens. Athens hadn’t really been on his itinerary. No, it was more or less of a detour for him--sanctuary while he waited for his colleagues Silas and Timothy to claim him. They’d had to send Paul away after he so angered a group of Thessalonian Jews that they followed him to his next destination and stirred up trouble there. So here he was--in Athens, on his own, with a bit of time on his hands to take in the sights. He had no intention of engaging in any kind of ministry or evangelism. He wouldn’t be there long enough to plant a church or anything. But then he noticed the *shrines with their idols*—idols everywhere and not just one god, *hundreds* of them!

According to author and pastor Don Richardson, Athens was the “god capital of the world,” a place so full of gods that the Athenians must have needed something like the Yellow Pages just to keep track of them all.¹ The author of the book of Acts, Luke, tells us that, strict monotheist that Paul was, he was revolted by all the idols he encountered. Nevertheless, one particular altar jumped out at him and gave him pause. On it was inscribed, “To an Unknown God.” You see, despite the sheer volume of gods represented in their city, the Athenians were *still* afraid of forgetting and offending some deity and risking a tragedy like the mysterious plague that had descended upon the city in the 6th Century BCE. Taking in this sight, Paul was apparently able to set aside his revulsion long enough to assess the Athenian situation at a deeper level. As theologically promiscuous as it may have felt to him to encounter hundreds of false gods there, it

¹ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, California: Venture Books, Revised edition, 1984), p20.

was actually a sign of *something more*. These people cared. They were seeking and reaching for something larger than themselves. Boy, were they ever seeking! Somehow they just hadn't yet managed to find the one true God, the Unknown God.

With that realization, Paul *just had to speak up*. In the synagogue, in the marketplace. With Jews and with Gentiles. With clerics and philosophers and politicians. He met them whomever and wherever they were. And he spoke to them in their own language, quoting universal wisdom from *their own* Greek poetry, which happened to dovetail quite nicely with his own Christian message. He was able to acknowledge honestly, if a tad facetiously, their *extreme* religiosity. He was able to show respect for their culture without necessarily embracing it himself. This was a bit of an epiphany for Paul, not unlike Jesus' experience with the Canaanite woman. Up until this encounter, Paul's ministry had been directed primarily toward his fellow Jews. From this point on, it would expand to encompass Gentiles as well.

As it turned out, these people absolutely loved hearing and talking about the latest ideas whenever they could. They experienced Paul's Christian perspective as novel and intriguing, and so they invited him to speak with them at greater length. They listened intently and dialogued with him, yet Paul did not win many converts that day. His ideas struck the majority as distasteful and overly demanding. Bodily resurrection had zero appeal for people who couldn't wait to lose their physical bodies and move into a strictly spiritual realm when they died. Concepts of judgment and sacrifice did not square with Hedonist philosophers' pursuit of contentment through the total avoidance of pain, anxiety, and anything generally unpleasant. Thanks, but no thanks, Paul. They wouldn't be constructing an altar for *that* God! ...Nevertheless, some *did* join Paul and become believers that day...

While we may or may not be in total agreement with Paul theologically, his encounter with the Athenians *does* provide a rough model for our own outreach as individuals and as a church. First, Paul recognized that the peoples' obsession with idols and the latest ideas was a sign of *something more*, providing both a distraction and a mask to disguise the extreme spiritual hunger that lay just beneath the surface. Paul not only saw this clearly, but he had compassion for the people and where they were on their journeys. Today we have our own religious seekers and secular philosophers. As Paul experienced, some are more interested in the pursuit itself. They prefer the endless search for an Unknown God or a capital "T" Truth and will be unwilling to settle into a particular faith tradition or church for very long. *But some will*. Some will come to understand that God is *not* tucked away within some yet to be discovered, mysterious practice. God is *not* hiding or keeping God's whereabouts a deep, dark secret to be revealed only to a select few. God is, in fact, right here, in and between, above, below, and all around us; the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Several will be relieved to hear and begin to comprehend this. A few will feel like they have finally come home to themselves and God. A few more will be delighted to learn that God is still speaking, and so the search does not by definition have to end with joining this church.

These are some of the people we need to invite to join us here on Sunday mornings. "Well, where are they?" you might ask. We've hung our UCC banner boldly proclaiming that we don't reject anyone. We've carefully laid out our Extravagant Welcome mat. They'll see. They'll find us. Or they already know who we are. Doesn't everyone in Wexford County know us by our reputation? They'd already be here if they really wanted to be.

I have noted with interest how many of your friends and friends of friends have recently stepped through our doorway for events other than worship and remarked that they had no idea how many people in this church they already knew and liked. No idea. What does this mean? Apparently we're not talking about our church outside of the building...or at least not enough. And not only to strangers, but to our own acquaintances. We may not want to impose on anyone. We may not completely grasp all that we have to offer in this little community of faith. Or we may want to leave it a well-kept secret, just for ourselves to know and enjoy.

But there are people out there, as in Athens, who, whether they realize it or not, are hungry, hungry for a place in which to connect with God and community in a meaningful way. If you don't think we're doing that here, I would invite you to ponder the profound ways in which we came together to support Candy Lakin and her family and to walk with her in her living and in her dying. I don't think I've ever experienced anything so joyful, loving, or Spirit-filled as the serenade so many of us participated in at the Lakin Smith home several weeks ago. And I don't know that I've ever been so moved as I was at this time last month when, as weak as she was, Candy made a point of being together with us here for one last communion celebration. Who *wouldn't* want to be part of a community like that?

Where did Paul find *his converts*? Out and about. In the marketplace and out on Mars Hill. Speaking their language and taking an interest in their culture. Paul's methods were very much in keeping with the advice many church vitality experts are giving these days: Leave the building. Go where the people are. Hold your meetings in public, in restaurants and parks and even in bars! Get people curious about who you are and what you're doing. Get to know the popular

culture. Interact with people in their own environments and on their own terms. Find some common ground on which to build a conversation.

Now before I lose you in that scary, distasteful world of evangelism, I would like to share something from the recent Board of Trustees retreat. After drawing our no-holds-barred dreams for this church with our non-dominant hands, then sharing and talking them through, a common theme emerged: Board members were eager to do mission work locally, whether that meant inviting the community in for a free meal each month or taking Sunday school kids to do pet therapy with seniors. Mostly people wanted to get out of the building and into the community, to serve God in the Mars Hills and the marketplaces of Cadillac. Where their actions could speak as loud, if not louder, than their words.

Which brings me to another thing *some* of the church vitality experts are saying. And that is that a church's health and vitality are not strictly numbers games. In some cases, vitality might not be about membership or attendance numbers at all. To these experts, it's more about the depth of relationship churchgoers experience with God and with one another. It's more about peoples' levels of loyalty and commitment to their church family and its mission. It's more about the amount of energy and activity generated around giving back-- coming to the aid of people in need of some of the most basic things like food and shelter and justice. It's about being the hands and the feet and the mouths of Christ in the world.

As a congregation, I believe we do demonstrate each of these traits in our own unique way. But I also believe that there's always more work to be done. We need look no further than Paul and his tireless travels to realize that there's *always* something more. While our goal may not be to save souls in the manner of Paul or some of our more evangelical sisters and brothers in Christ, we

don't want *anyone* to have to travel through this life with God as a complete unknown or, perhaps worse yet, as an angry, hateful tyrant. If we can be willing, adaptable, constant vessels of God's love and grace and compassion at home with our family and friends and in our travels with acquaintances and strangers, then we will have nailed it.

And so I pray that we may live ever more fully into our identity as the church of the extravagant welcome, the church that, not only doesn't reject anyone, but meets and embraces everyone in Christian love, right where they are.

May it be so. Amen.