



Acts 17:22-25

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.

23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”

Special Music - Give Me Your Eyes - Brandon Heath

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYSJBb1iROU>

When I was serving as the Minister of Connections at First Christian Church of Conroe, one of my responsibilities was overseeing the food pantry. When I say “oversee” it really means that I was responsible for the budget, and also acting as an interface between the food pantry and the board. I had a wonderful group of volunteers that actually ran the pantry. All I really did was keep the wheels greased to make the way that they served the community less stressful and more gratifying. I was not the lynchpin. I was not the cornerstone. I was not the glue that held everything together. When I was at the pantry on Wednesday mornings, I helped unload the truck, kept the carts repaired, made the coffee. moved supplies around and generally tried to stay out of the way so that people could do their jobs.

There is a huge difference between giving people food and serving people and I tried to speak into this at every opportunity. Each client had a face and a name. Each client had a story to share. Each client was an individual with a unique perspective on their condition. I tried to instill in every volunteer that our service was not about putting food into boxes and giving those boxes to nameless, faceless, story-less people. I tried to teach the volunteers that they needed to look past the way people were dressed, how they acted, what kind of car they drove, whether or not they were homeless, what color they were, the nature of their politics or any other thing that could be construed as fence that separated us from them. I wanted all of the volunteers to understand that we were not there to give away food, but to serve the people that walked through the door and lift

them up. I truly wanted the volunteers to see the pantry from the eyes of the clients rather than through the eyes of charity.

People often feel guilty about needing to visit a food bank. Most people are not looking for a handout, but their drive to take care of their families will often lead them to do things that they normally would not do, like visit a food bank. The last thing that they need is to feel that the people providing the food do it in a manner that appears to set the giver above the receiver. In other words, they do not want to feel looked down upon or pitied because they already feel guilty about being in a position (often not of their own choosing) of needing to accept help from strangers. When we take time to look them in the eye, learn their names, listen to their stories and embrace their heartbeat, they become struggling people rather than objects of pity. It provides them with a sense of worth. That they are cared about not because they are poor or needy, but because they are human. When we climb into the gutter to meet them where they are at, learn who they are, put names with faces, and listen to their stories, they feel appreciated and cared about because they are no longer part of the faceless, nameless masses, but instead human beings, created in God's image with worth and value.

And do know that when we lift people in this way, those same people will often take on lives of responsibility and begin to help others in the same way they have been helped. Our goal is to allow Jesus to use us to lift others so that they too can begin to meet the needs of the people around them.

How did Paul get to where our story takes place?

- A. We are still talking about Paul's 2nd missionary journey and his travels with Silas and Timothy**
- B. Just about everywhere they went they ran into trouble.**
- C. There were people that followed them from town to town just to incite the people and upset the local government.**
- D. When things would get a little hot, the Christians in the communities would send Paul, Silas and Timothy on their way to the next town.**
- E. This happened over and over again**
- F. This same thing happened in Berea and the believers sent Paul on to Athens. Silas and Timothy stayed for a while in Berea with plans to join Paul in Athens later.**

What is it like for Paul in Athens?

- A. Athens was a pretty unique city in Paul's day.**
- B. It was a city of thinkers (Philosophers, theologians, artists, scientists)**
- C. The most common form of entertainment was arguing with each other but they usually did it in a civil manner.**
- D. The quest for knowledge was the ultimate goal**
- E. The city was filled with every kind of idol from all over the world because Athens was considered a seat of knowledge and wisdom which**

made it a community that included knowledge seekers from just about anywhere in the known world.

- F. Paul is disturbed by all the idols, so he is speaking almost daily in the local synagogue to Jews and “God-fearing” Greeks. He is also doing this in the marketplace.
- G. This is not unusual in Athens. The people in Athens were used to people jumping on their soapboxes just about anywhere and spouting their philosophical, theological or scientific views.
- H. Paul catches the ear of some of the philosophers who think that his message needs to be explored and they take him to the Areopagus.

What is the Areopagus?

- A. The Areopagus is a cropping of rock northwest of the Acropolis in Athens. Court was held at the Areopagus and people were tried there by the great minds of the city with regards to lawbreakers and religious matters.
- B. It is to the Areopagus that Paul is brought to make his arguments regarding the message that he has been delivering in the market and the synagogue.
- C. It is at this point that today’s passage of scripture takes place.

Putting ourselves in Paul’s shoes

- A. Do we see this as a challenge or as an opportunity?

- B. Do we speak dogmatically or through argument?**
- a. Speaking dogmatically generally means that the argument being presented is not open to correction or revision.
 - b. When I say argument, I do not mean shouting at each other. I mean providing information with a sense of exploring a topic through logic and persuasion.
- C. What do we feel is the best approach to reaching this body of highly intelligent, truth seeking men who question their own teachings in a quest for understanding the nature of the universe through logic and scientific pursuits?**
- D. Do we truly understand that the approach to persuading intellectuals is different than the approach to persuading farmers? The truth does not change, but the logic and persuasions have to take on a different tone and texture for differing audiences. Paul understood that he needed to adapt the message for his audience.**

What is Paul's approach?

- A. First, he compliments them and sets the boundaries for discussion**
- a. His opening statement creates an atmosphere that will allow his audience to open their ears.
People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.
 - b. He raises them up by acknowledging that he believes that they are very religious.

- c. He sets the stage in doing that and lets them know that this is going to be a discussion about religion.

B. He then appeals to their sense of scientific process by saying:

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship

- a. He's telling them that he took the time to look carefully at their objects of worship so that they will know that he has done his research and that this discussion is not off the cuff.

C. He then begins the argument starting in a position where they are; a place that is in their home court by saying:

- a. **I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god.**
- b. Here is a fact that they can hang their hats on.
- c. They have a statue to an unknown god. They admit that.
- d. The Greeks, like the Romans, had a god for everything. Just to be sure that they didn't offend a god that they might have left out and who might be offended, they created an idol for an unknown god.
- e. Paul sees this as a place to plant his argument by explaining who the unknown god is and why he matters more than just a nameless idol.

So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

- f. This is Paul's way of saying "I know what a logical and pragmatic people you are and you appreciate hearing truth, especially when it clarifies things already in your lives. So, let me tell you who the unknown god is and how he fits into your world view."

Paul explains the unknown god

- A. Because Paul meets his audience where they are, as they are, he has their attention and their ears.
 - a. Paul did not speak down to them or belittle them.
 - b. He did not tell them that they were wrong, only that he has an answer for something that they acknowledged that they do not understand.
 - c. He treats them as equals so that the argument is worthy in their eyes for consideration
 - d. He can speak with confidence and he knows that they are listening when he says:
 - 24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.
 - 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else."
 - e. He made no conditions for hearing and understanding this message.
 - i. No one was asked to change their thinking before they could hear the message.

- ii. **No one was asked to change their lifestyle to hear the message.**
- iii. **No one was asked to give up their worship practices to hear the message.**
- iv. **Instead, Paul offered the crowd an opportunity to hear how important the unknown God was. He didn't tell them it was wrong to worship the unknown God. Instead, he gave them reason to contemplate a truth that was already a part of their belief system that they couldn't otherwise explain.**

How do we apply this?

- A. **All too often we predetermine who is in an appropriate position to hear the message of the gospel.**
 - a. **We expect people to rise to our set of standards before we will allow God to use us to speak into them.**
 - i. **Take a bath and then we will talk.**
 - ii. **Clean up your language before we discuss this**
 - iii. **Stop drinking, get off the drugs, stop smoking so that you are in a holy position to hear the truth.**
 - iv. **Prove to me that you are willing to change before I waste my time or breath on you.**

b. We may not do this consciously, but we do often create a system of standards in our mind that we adhere to when it comes to beginning a discussion about Jesus and the gospel.

c. How about this reason that I have heard so often?

“I never discuss politics or religion with anyone that I have just met.”

Whether it is the fear of engagement, the desire to not be offensive, or pressure of feeling obligated, this is never an appropriate reason for a Christian.

d. I am not talking about a Hell fire and damnation speech that we give to everyone we meet. I am talking about being able to share how much Jesus means to us and how much God has blessed us in any environment.

e. But, in order to share at this level

i. We have to meet people where they are, not where we are.

ii. We have to be willing to look for common ground

iii. We cannot be condescending and judgmental.

iv. We have to value the spirit of the other person.

v. It is not a question of finding out how they arrived where they are at, although at times that can be helpful and allow us to find a place of compassion. It is really about accepting them as they are, at this place, at this moment in time and treating them the way we would want to be treated.

This week, I want us all to try to set aside our differences and take time to embrace our commonalities. Let us meet people where they are without judgement, regardless of their level of despair, pain or circumstances. Let us remove the barriers that separate us by not passing preconceived notions about people based on their appearance, beliefs, political ideals or any other human constructed walls. God does not allow these things to prevent Him from loving us. If we claim the relationship and unconditional love of Christ in our lives, how can we use the divisions that he so abhors to separate us from our love of others? When these superficial walls prevent us from sharing the love and grace of God with others, we are failing in our mission to take the gospel to all people everywhere. Let us embrace that which is most important to us by sharing the message of Jesus Christ unconditionally to a weary world hungering for the truth. Let us meet people where they are and lift them to our Lord and Savior so that they, too, can come to know the Peace, Grace, Love, Joy and Mercy of our heavenly father.

AMEN