

Making Common Ground
Acts 17:22-31*
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry
Sixth Sunday after Easter
May 14, 2023
Grace, Southgate

Come Holy Spirit and fill us with your truth, in your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

He was not a follower before the cross. He had nothing to do with the disciples prior to Jesus' resurrection. But now, Saul/Paul is a man, whose entire life has been flipped and twisted. Before he was happy to see Christians die, he was the one who held the coats as the first deacon Stephen was stoned to death, now, after his road to Damascus conversion experience, Paul wants the whole world to see and know how Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified, died and has risen and that He is the Messiah, the one who gives life to the world.

Paul is wandering through Athens, which is a great seat of learning, a center of philosophical conversations and theological inquiries. **It was a place where intellectual curiosity ruled the public square.**

As he traverses the city, Paul is taken aback, he is put off by the preponderance of idols. The worship of multiple gods is not at all to Paul's liking. He offers his perspective, and some of the Greek philosophers who hear him are moved by his words, impressed with his rhetoric and they invite him to come and speak at the Areopagus.

The Areopagus, was the early aristocratic council of ancient Athens, an ancient revered outdoor venue where the Athenians had held weighty debates for centuries. So here is Paul, speaking to an august crowd. Here is the truly interesting part, the piece that may have some real resonance for us in this time and place, though he disagrees with their polytheistic practices, he does not start by pointing out his dislikes and their disagreements about all that is Holy.

He does not say, "YOU ARE WRONG."

Instead showing his diplomatic brilliance, his cultural sensitivity, his evangelical aptitude he avoids condemning them for their worship of so very many gods, and idols. Instead, he graciously marvels at their overt religiosity.

He compliments them on their many altars to various gods littered through the city. He says, "Why you all are so religious that you even have an altar erected to an "Unknown God," the ultimate hedging of bets! And then he pivots from there.

That God that you do not know, the God whom you call the “Unknown God” that God whom you created an altar for, is one whom I proclaim. That God is the one who made heaven and earth. This God, our God, does not live in shrines made by human hands, for this God has made all things that be, and that God is not far from us, for, then using a line from the pagan Greek philosophers Paul proclaims, “This God: in him we live and move and have our being.” This God is with us here, with us now.

Some began to ridicule Paul, but others, others said, “We’re going to need to hear more about this from you...Some began to believe, some even joined the movement.

Friends how often do we find ourselves with different opinions, opposing perspectives, disparate beliefs? I wonder if rather than perceiving the differences among us as fixed chasms that cannot be crossed, I wonder if we might take a lesson from Paul and approach our conversations differently, maintain our perspectives but reaching some commonality and agreement?

How does he do this?

First, Paul ventures into a place where he knows there is likely to be different opinions. So often these days I think we shy away from places where people might disagree with us. Instead, we speak mostly with people who hold similar convictions. The result is we reinforce each other and become more and more locked into our own perspective.

Paul goes squarely to the place where people will disagree. He offers his truth. Some hear him. Some are intrigued others annoyed. Some biblical translations say he was invited to the Areopagus, others say he was taken into custody. Regardless Paul is then asked to offer his thoughts before the crowds.

His next statement to the crowd is one of support. A commonality that they share. He makes a connection. He shows some understanding and some empathy for those gathered to hear him. A common purpose.

“I see you are a religious people...with lots of altars to many Gods.

Then pointing out the altar to the unknown God he posits that perhaps this unknown God, is indeed the very God that Paul was talking about the other day.

He doesn’t dispute the people’s perspective, instead he builds on it. Layers upon it another possible perspective and opinion.

He offers his truth to the people, this unknown God is the God whom Paul worships, the one who made the heavens and the earth.

Then as he concludes his truth he uses a phrase known to them all, a phrase that they know from their revered philosophers, “this God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being.”

This God will judge us by the one whom he raised from the dead.

As soon as Paul mentioned Jesus being raised from the dead, some started heckling him. He doesn't return their taunts. He does what many of us could benefit greatly from doing. He stops talking.

He leaves the council and understands that his words will be mulled over by those who had ears to hear him.

In this moment, Paul does not have the need to have the last word!

We are told, a number of people joined the movement that day and in the days that followed.

I wonder if we who live in such a polarized world, might begin to create more ways forward together by doing as Paul did those few days in Athens?

I for one am going to give it a try. Following these steps:

- 1) Venture to places and communities, be in the midst of people who may not agree with me.
- 2) Take time to appreciate the culture, ways and perspectives of the people with a different viewpoint.
- 3) Assume goodness. Point out commonalities.
- 4) Graciously speak our own truth, without barbs or sarcasm.
- 5) End our offering with words or truths that will resonate with the people with a different perspective.
- 6) Lastly, leave space for response, no need for a last word, "*Let the silence do the Heavy lifting*" (Trademarked phrase from *Fierce Conversations*)

I wonder what agreements and way forward we might come to using Paul's time with the people of Athens as our model.

I wonder! Amen.