

Sunday November 6, 2022

## Lesson 10: Showing Respect for Other Faith Traditions

Scripture: Acts 17: 16-46

### **Context:**

This fall we continue our series titled “Freedom.” Today we start a new unit titled “Faithful Conversations.” The focus of the unit will be on how we have neighborly conversations with those different than us who might be outside our comfort zones. Today’s scripture lesson comes from the book of Acts, the book dedicated to the history of the church and telling the story of how the early Christians spread the gospel. Today we explore how Paul’s speech to the Athenians provides us with a model for conversations with people from different faith traditions.

The scene of Paul preaching on Mars Hill is one of the most famous in Christian tradition. In this scene, we see potentially the greatest challenge the early church faced. The power of the gospel up until this point in Acts had reached the rich and poor, the Jew and Gentile, the male and female. But could the gospel hold its own in the sophisticated intellectual environment of a cosmopolitan city, the very best of pagan culture, home to distinguished philosophers such as Pericles and Plato?<sup>1</sup> When Paul arrives in the city though he stands unimpressed. The city is full of idols and the skeptics comes out to debate him. Finally, they decide to put this country bumpkin to the test.

At Mars Hill, Paul is transformed. In a well-constructed piece of classical rhetoric, Paul, a Christian Socrates, first flatters his audience about their idolatry and then tells them he has an answer to their altar to “an unknown God.”<sup>2</sup> Paul plays to their love of learning and how they search to know and understand.

Paul also plays to their obsession of the natural world. Much of the focus of the ancient world was trying to understand how the world works and who made it. Thus, the idols dedicated to the various elements. Paul tells them they search for the God who made it all, and God cannot be contained in human structures like buildings and temples. God is much too untamed to do so.

Then Paul takes a risk and brings up resurrection, potentially facing rejection by his audience. They may agree to a created world, a common humanity, but there is no “natural theology” when it comes to a resurrection.<sup>3</sup> Yet Paul preaches it because this is central to the proclamation of the gospel; the scandal of the faith to fly in the face of reason and order.

At this juncture, Paul begins to lose some of his audience. They scoff at him. Yet some people are intrigued. Who is God to have power of life and death? Several approach him after dismissed by the council saying they wish to hear more. They include members of the Mars Hill Council as well as people from the crowd. As they hear more of the good news, they begin to believe and thus, the church in Athens comes to life. There is new life and now the unknown has a name to these life seekers.

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William H. “Acts.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 142.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-143.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

## **Application**

There are several lines in Paul's speech to stand out to us as we think of how to have fruitful conversations with people about our faith. One is from verse twenty-seven: "God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us." As we read this line, we come to see faith isn't about being able to prove God's existence and having tangible proof. Instead, it is about being able to connect heart with mind and explain who God is in our experience.

I once had a conversation with a recently graduated seminary student about the experience of attending school and both the things we liked and disliked about the experiences. One of the things to come up in our conversation was how in some ways we had to seek to explore in depth how we experienced Jesus growing up in the deep South and explaining it to others. We both agreed how some of our professors and even fellow students were mystified about how intimately we could talk about how we knew our Lord.

It was being able to feel him when we sing the old hymns like "Precious Lord," or "He Lives." There's the experience of going to a funeral whether in a little country church or a big cathedral and watching folks dressed to the nines coming to express condolences and the visits to the house afterwards with piles of food, the whole-time feeling Jesus present. It's the experience of driving through small towns watching neighbors speak to each other and seeing daily life with the small church signs telling of the good news. And there's of course the times you talk about how Jesus is in your heart, whether it's watching someone you love be baptized, or thinking about your confirmation, or just the fact you can talk to him as you roll past the rows of cotton on a daily commute.

Through it all, Jesus is there. We can feel him all around us, in both the joys and the sorrows, and even in the mundane. He is our Lord and Savior, and yet he is also our friend and comfort.

In the world where I live, I will confess I do not interact daily with people of different faiths as far as I know. Yet what is more common to me are people who live in the Christ-haunted South where they know of God and religious people, and yet they do not adhere to a faith. Sometimes it is because they were not raised this way and it is foreign to them. Other times, sadly, it is because the Christ they have been taught or heard about is not the Jesus I know.

This Jesus is often cruel or judgmental to the point he does not love. He is not present in the mundane, but only in religious buildings on Sunday mornings for either perfect people or giant hypocrites. He is not a friend or companion; he is someone to be feared or someone who does not care.

When I have conversations with people about Jesus, I often let them lead and deeply listen. I have come to find shoving Jesus down their throat doesn't help. Yet over time, as the relationship is built, I can talk about the Jesus I know. This Jesus is indeed the Lord and Savior who invites me to surrender myself unto him, who changes and rocks my world. Yet he is also the one who is near to me, much like the people I look to as loving and kind. He is the one who sees me in my sins and imperfections and loves me still.

What I have often come to find, just as Paul did with the Athenians, there will be people who want empirical proof of God. Those people may or may not come to faith. Yet there are others who are looking for something else. They want to hear about God who is near and present, who loves them with their questions and their doubts, their sins and their virtues. As Christians, what we can offer is listening and then our own stories, describing what we have felt and seen in our lives in holy conversations. Jesus will take care of the rest and will be the one to lead those

unto him.

What places are modern Athens for us today? What are the questions or comments you hear about Christianity? How would you describe who Jesus is in your life? Who are the people we can walk alongside as they have questions about God and life? Why do you think it is important for Christians to be patient and open to others as we talk about our faith?

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