

May 26, 2024
 Lesson 13: Making Connections
 Scripture: Acts 17: 16-34

Context:

Today we conclude our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” as we have looked at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Today we conclude our unit titled “Empowering Spirit,” as we examine how Jesus and the Holy Spirit led people to focus on spreading the gospel to languages where others could understand the gift of faith and grace. Today’s lesson will focus on how we look at discussing our Christian faith when in conversation with religious skeptics.

The passage for today’s lesson comes from the book of Acts, also known as the history book of the church. Paul journeys all over Asia Minor and for today’s passage he ends up in Athens, the very heart of pagan culture, the town of Pericles and Plato.¹ Paul is not impressed with what he sees though. Everywhere there are idols and people are content to use academia to look down upon others. Yet there is also a curiosity to the message Paul preaches and so he is led to the Areopagus, where Athenians spend their days doing what intellectuals enjoy doing – searching and debating new ideas.² Paul will be able to present his message before a group and they will hear what a monotheistic Jew has to say about a living God.

When Paul arrives to the Areopagus, he wisely moves to both praise and then rhetoric to move the people to hear about this living God. He starts off with naming their altar to “an unknown God,” (vs. 32), and then tells them he knows about the one they seek to praise. Appealing to their knowledge of creation and common humanity, Paul appeals to their pagan and academic nature as those subjects were the focus points of their debates and conversations.³ Paul is hoping the natural world and its glory will move them to see how God is the one who has made all these wonderful things.

Yet for Paul there is a need to preach something beyond the natural world. So, Paul moves to something which transforms all these things – the Resurrection. It is the gift of the Resurrection with Jesus which makes all new life possible as humanity is given an assurance of God over all things. This proves the power of sin and death are defeated.

This mentioning of the Resurrection was risky for Paul. The academics and pagans may be able to agree to a “natural theology,” yet an assertion of the Resurrection is appealing against the norms of reason and experience.⁴ As it follows, there are those who scoff at Paul at this point and move onto the next debate of the day. There are others though who are intrigued, and they come to Paul to know more. They are intrigued by God and they are intrigued at this Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 143.

⁴ Ibid., 144.

Application

Growing up in the Deep South, I noticed a dichotomy growing up. On one hand, in the circles I grew up in, one was expected to aim for higher education, most likely attending a college or university. You were to strive for academic success and to grow in knowledge and wisdom. Yet on the other hand, there was also a caution to not engage with everything; to veer away from anything where professors or other students might challenge one's faith. It was what we might label, a "yes, but" world where certain things were to be embraced and other things were to be avoided.

Yet my experience proved that sometimes conversations with skeptics or academics were where my faith was both affirmed and challenged, leading me to believe God wants us to go to the places where God has not always been a welcomed name. Because it is in those places God can do some of God's best work, both on us and through others. And sometimes, it may not end with any changed minds. Yet it can lead to more searching in being a person of faith and God finding more ways to push us as followers of Jesus.

In my experience, most skeptics do indeed struggle with concepts such as the Resurrection and how it is so beyond human understanding. Yet where most skeptics become entranced is with the natural world and seeing how this intricacy around us could have not come on our own; this was designed. The days and the years may not match up in our calculations, yet there is something so awe-inspiring about the world and the universe, there must be a higher power behind all these things.

For today's world, I am not sure we have such a thing as an Areopagus. We might claim colleges and universities are where skeptics live yet the reality is they are everywhere, in small towns and in big cities. People have questions about the faith and might have some very good reasons for maybe even why they struggle with the idea of a living God.

And this is where we follow our forefather Paul and seek to find the language in which skeptics might come to ask questions about faith. It might not be in the same language we use in the church, yet this is the genius of what Paul does; he speaks in the language they know. As he does so, he invites them to open up their minds to what he has to offer. We can do the same, trusting the Holy Spirit to be at work in the skeptic's lives and trust God will do the rest of the work.

To speak in the language today, particularly with skeptics and cynics, I am not sure if preaching like Paul is always the best route. In fact, I have often found deep listening with other people is a means by which we can figure out where the struggle is on how a person sees and understands faith. As we listen, we can hear things behind their words and see where the struggle might be. And then in the right time and place, we can move the conversation just a little forward, leaving them with a nugget to chew on and ponder.

This also means we should not be afraid to talk to people who are religious skeptics. If anything, we should be having conversations with these people. What is it that pushes them to reject the Lord? Sometimes there is nothing we can say or do because minds are made up and they won't hear it. Yet there are other ones who are searching for answers. And who knows? Maybe the Lord made you for a time as this; to walk with someone and to help them ask questions about God, faith, and life. You may not have all the answers and yet you do have your presence, a gift of yourself.

I am never really impressed when I hear of students who avoid a professor because they've heard "he's an atheist," or when they fight with professors over a social issue and then throw eternal condemnation in their face. While I appreciate those students seeking to keep their

faith, I wonder how instead God might could or is using this student to push or provoke the professor with their humble faith in Jesus. Who knows? Perhaps the Lord is leading us into conversations or encounters with skeptics because God needs us to tell them in our own way of the goodness and grace found in Jesus Christ who is over all things and all people.

Have you ever had a conversation with a skeptic about the faith? Why do you think God wants us to be in relationship with people who are different than us? Where have you seen a skeptic at work in your life to help you in your faith? Where do you think a modern Areopagus would be today? Who is a skeptical person/people you can pray for?

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