

Acts 17:22–31

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

29Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

Living God, with joy we celebrate the presence of your risen Word. Enliven our hearts by your Holy Spirit so that we may proclaim the good news of eternal and abundant life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

How do we, as Christians, relate to each other if we are part of different denominations? How do we relate to people of other faiths? Or people who don’t subscribe to a specific religion, or maybe have no faith in a higher power at all? When I came to Canby, the impression I was given was that over 50% of the people in town were nonreligious. That’s a large number, and to be honest I was a bit skeptical. In reality, for a large number of people, if you ask them if they go to church, or go to church regularly, they will say no. But if you ask them what religion they follow they’ll say “I’m Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, or something. They just don’t actively participate.

I think Paul ran into something similar when he was in Athens. Directed by the Holy Spirit to leave Asia, Paul worked his way down the coast of the Aegean Sea to the center of Greek culture, the famed city of Athens. There he was invited to address the cultured “seekers” at the Areopagus. That was the public meeting place where the intelligentsia spent their time discussing the newest and greatest ideas. It was the highbrow Facebook of the ancient world. The people of Athens, especially the rich folks with time on their hands, spent time thinking about religion, philosophy, and probably attended many religious rituals. I don’t think many of them necessarily believed in all of them, but the rituals had become part of the civic tradition, so they were deemed important. Religious planting and harvest festivals are a good example. Who wants to give up a good party, just because you really don’t believe in the particular god that is supposed to be celebrated. So, how did Paul preach the Risen Christ to a sophisticated non-church crowd?

That’s a good question. One commentator said he met periodically with his churches young people to learn what was on their minds. One obviously intelligent and well-read teenager asked a question directly related to this text. She said, “In *Have a Little Faith* Mitch Albom raises a question about who should be ministered to. Should we send missionaries to other organized

religions? Or should we leave them to their own belief structure and concentrate on those who don't have a religion?"

She was asking the question that challenges all of us in this post-modern pluralistic world. How should we treat members of other religions? Should we just leave them alone, respecting their choice of faith? Should we have interfaith dialogue so that we understand them better but make no effort to convert them? Or should we witness to them in an effort to make them disciples of Jesus? Should we help them when they are in trouble or should we establish laws that keep them from "causing trouble?"

At least regarding the last couple of questions Jesus is clear in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gave the world a startling new way to deal with people who not only hold different beliefs than we do, but who also oppose us, even violently, people who declare themselves to be our enemies in religion or politics or personal relations. In Matthew 5:43-46 he said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemies.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors (the greatest sinners of that day) doing that?"

So according to Jesus, we must love members of other religions and do good to them. But that doesn't answer the question about evangelism, especially to those who are already followers of another religion. What does it mean to love a Hindu or a Jew or a Muslim? Specifically, how should we approach them in love on matters of religion?

I know there are some who will have a hard time with what I'm going to say, but Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sister religions. We all recognize the Old Testament of the Bible, Counter to what some believe, we all believe in the same God.

I remember years ago when I volunteered to help with the General Assembly meeting in the Twin Cities. At the opening reception I had a conversation with a pastor from Indiana. This gentleman was assigned to a committee on ecumenical issues, and they were going to talk about the denomination's relation to Judaism. He declared that basically we couldn't have any kind of ecumenical relationship with them because they didn't believe in God. When I pressed him about this he declared that because they don't believe in Jesus as the son of God, it's not God that they worship. I was a bit flabbergasted to be honest.

I saw another take on the whole thing on the internet. "How to Explain the Religions of Abraham to the Hollywood Generation":

"Think of it like a movie. The Torah is the first one, and the New Testament the sequel. Then the Qu'ran comes out, and it retcons (meaning it revises an aspect of a work retrospectively, typically by introducing a piece of new information that imposes a different interpretation on previously described events.) the last one like it never happened. There's still Jesus, but he's not the main character anymore, and the messiah hasn't shown up yet.

Jews like the first movie but ignored the sequels. Christians think you need to watch the first two, but the third movie doesn't count. The Moslems think the third one was the best, and Mormons liked the second one so much, they started writing fanfiction that doesn't fit with ANY of the series canon."

Anyway, in today's scripture the greatest missionary the world has ever seen approaches the pluralistic melting pot of first century Athens, the cultural and intellectual center of the ancient world. The way he deals with members of other religions and those with no religion offers us one way to deal with others..

Verse 16 says, “While Paul was waiting for his friends in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” He did not see this multiplicity of religious expression as a good thing. How could he? He had been raised a Jew, so he knew the monotheistic texts like this one from Isaiah 45: “There is no god but me, so turn to me all the ends of the earth and be saved.” Paul was greatly distressed by all the religions on display in that cradle of democracy. So, what did he do? Knock down the idols? Insult the members of the other faiths?

Listen to verse 17. “So, he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks and in the marketplace with those who happened to be there,” which included some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. “He reasoned.” The word means, he conversed with them, engaged in an interfaith dialogue with them. He had the mental toughness to talk face to face with members of other religions, even when they argued vociferously back, which those philosophers did.

He wasn’t just politely inquiring about their faith, seeking to understand them better, though there is obviously merit in that. He was preaching, says verse 18, about Jesus and the resurrection. In other words, he didn’t stop with civil discourse. As he dialogued, he passionately preached the very heart of the Christian faith, the risen Christ. Some of his listeners mocked him, others were confused by him, and all of them wanted to hear more. So, they invited him into the Areopagus, the market place of ideas in Athens.

Listen to the way he speaks to this pluralistic melting pot in verse 22. “Men of Athens (Sorry ladies, but the patriarchy was in full force back then), I see that in every way you are very religious.” Addressing them with respect, he acknowledges their faith, touches down in their spiritual lives, begins where they live religiously. He can do that because rather than jumping to conclusions, he had carefully investigated their religions. “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.’” They were covering their bases, acknowledging the mystery of the divine, admitting that they didn’t know everything there was to know about God. And Paul uses that admission as the connecting point.

Paul continues, “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you,” and so he begins his sermon. In the whole first part, verses 24-28, he emphasizes that common ground, while subtly pointing out where they had gone wrong. We are all the creatures of the one God who made everything. He “gives to all men life and breath and everything.” From “one man he made every nation,” and determined times and places. God made us, so that “men would seek after him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each of us.”

Notice how he is affirming their religious impulse; that came from God. All of us are seeking God. Then in verse 28 Paul quotes from two Greek poets to further establish common ground; “we are all children of God.” Clearly, he had studied classical Greek culture, so that he had these quotations on the tip of his tongue. He uses their culture to establish more connecting points for the gospel. Yes, he pretty directly critiques those places where they have gone wrong in their religious impulse. God does not live in temples and is not served by human hands. But as he lovingly approaches these adherents of other religions, he begins with the common ground between Christianity and other religions.

Then in vs. 29 he turns a corner, a very sharp corner. Referring to those Greek poets, he says, “Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we (note that “we,” not just “you,” including himself in his hard words, “I’m as guilty as you”) should not think that the Divine Being is like

gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill.” Hard words to an audience surrounded by idols, but it gets harder. “In the past God overlooked such ignorance....” Ouch! How politically incorrect can you get? “You don’t know the truth about God!” In our day, such talk would be seen as disrespectful at least,

Paul continues, because he knew he had a divine mandate to speak the truth to those who didn’t believe it. So, he says in vs. 30. “But God commands all people everywhere to repent.” That is blunt. God commands—not politely invites, but actually commands. Not just a few people, but all people everywhere. No one is exempt. No religion escapes this call to change, to change its mind about God. That kind of talk takes guts. Paul can only do this because he has a mission from God, and more specifically from the risen Christ.

That’s how he ends his sermon—with Christ. “For God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men (not just to Jews, but to Greeks, not just to Christians but to Hindus and Buddhists) by raising him from the dead.” With great respect, seeking as much common ground as possible, including himself in the call to repent, Paul proclaims the three central ways in which Christianity differs from all other religions, the three most offensive parts of Christianity—Jesus is The One sent by God, Jesus has risen from the dead, and Jesus will preside at the final judgment. Paul calls these members of other religions and of no religion to change their minds about religion.

Let’s be honest, we are in a community that is homogenous. Christianity, of one flavor or another, is pretty much it when it comes to religion. We also have agnostics, atheists, and of course I’m sure there are some “spiritual but not religious” folks around. We are not going to find Buddhists, Moslems, or Hindus in town here, but that doesn’t mean we can’t take Paul’s lesson to heart and help our neighbors who have strayed from church. I’ve said this before, but it bears mentioning again, if you’re not actively part of the church community it is really hard to call yourself a Christian. Christianity is a communal religion.

I mentioned that Paul’s way of doing things is one way. There are others. Notice in Acts 18 that Paul left Athens soon after that and went to Corinth. He was, after all, a traveling evangelist, a bit of a hit and run preacher. That may account for his bluntness. He didn’t always stick around and live with folks. We do, so if we’re going to be effective witnesses to members of other religions and to those with no religions, we will have to couch our honest words about Jesus in lavish displays of the love of Jesus. You see, I don’t think you are going to convert too many people by telling them they’re wrong. Maybe you can if the Holy Spirit works through you, but especially these days, convincing people with real evidence is hard enough, let alone trying to convince them with faith. The most effective way I know of to show others that Christianity is the religion to follow is to act as much like Jesus as we can.

And that’s why I want to end today where I began, with the words of Jesus in Matthew 5. If we don’t love our enemies, if we don’t pray for them, if we don’t bless them, if we don’t help them and show them hospitality and kindness, our words about the love of God in Jesus Christ will sound pretty hollow. We must respectfully acknowledge their faith and show them why ours is correct. We must love them as we love ourselves and lovingly tell them the Good News that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” After all, that’s what Jesus told us to do. Amen