

I

Some years ago, when our oldest boys were very young, we were looking together at a picture book. The book was full of colorful pictures of different animals and objects, and I would point to a picture, and my son would say, “That’s a gorilla.” Or, “That’s an airplane.” That sort of thing.

On the page among all these various objects was a picture of a telephone – the old wired kind with a handset that sat in a cradle on the top and a rotary dial – the kind my grandparents and parents had in their homes when I was my sons age. I pointed to the picture of the telephone and said, “What’s that?” And my son, who was born in 2011, long after Amy and I discontinued using the land line in our home, said, “I don’t know.”

I said, “That’s a phone.” And he said, “That’s not a phone.” I said, “Yes it is,” and he pointed to the rectangular cell phone resting on the charger on the counter and said, “No, that’s a phone.” And that’s when I first really became aware that the world in which my sons are coming of age is and will be different in so many ways than the one in which I grew up.

II

And I think all of us are aware, on some level, of just how rapid the pace of change has become in our world. All of us are aware that rapid advances in communications and technology are making our world much, much smaller

and more interconnected. And because our world is becoming smaller and more interconnected by the day, the generations that are coming after us will have more opportunities to encounter difference than any generation that has come before them. Our children and grandchildren will encounter far more people who look, think, pray, and worship differently than we ever did.

But they will not be the first followers of Christ to ever encounter a different world. In fact, just such a cross-cultural encounter is at the heart of our story for today.

III

This spring and summer, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the Book of Acts. And when we come to our story today, the Apostle Paul has been converted from the chief persecutor of the early church to its most irrepressible missionary. With the commission of the church leaders in Jerusalem, Paul and his companions have been traveling the Mediterranean world with the good news about Jesus. Sometimes, Paul’s message has been met warmly, and others, he’s been incarcerated, beaten, or otherwise forced to flee for his life, but nevertheless, Paul’s journeys continue.

And when we pick up our story today, we find the Apostle Paul is in the ancient city of Athens. By this time in its history, Athens was no longer the center of power in the region that it once had been a few centuries before, as the Greek empire had long since given way

to the Romans. However, Athens was still an important city, and it was incredibly religiously and ethnically diverse. There was a long-standing Jewish community in the city, but of course, Athens was also full of temples and shrines to the gods of Greek mythology, many of which the Romans simply adopted and gave new names. And apparently, the city had so many shrines and temples to so many different gods that the Athenians forgot which shrine went with which god, so they made a catch-all shrine, and inscribed upon it simply, “To an unknown god.”

So that’s the context for our story today, and now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Acts 17:15-34.

Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbling man want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this

new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For 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. The 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, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From 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, so 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. For “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.”

Since 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. While

God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because 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.'

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

As a man who had been born and raised to be a faithful, observant Jew, as a man who'd grown up doing his very best to keep God's commandments, it should not surprise us that Paul was deeply distressed to find himself in a city full of idols.

But notice what Paul did not do. He did not march to the Areopagus and demand that the Athenians immediately tear them down or face their doom.

Quite the contrary. Paul had enough love and respect for his Athenian neighbors to do his homework. He made a careful and detailed study of the city. He looked closely at their temples and shrines, close enough even to see the inscription "to an unknown god." He listened carefully to the way the philosophers constructed their

arguments. Before Paul made any attempt to engage the culture with the truth of the gospel, he became a student and learned as much as he possibly could about it first.

And then, when he had finished his study, Paul did not begin with all the reasons why he was right and everyone else was wrong. Instead, he led with what he had come to appreciate and valued about the Athenians culture, rather than what he had come to believe was lacking or in need. He said, "Athenians, I have seen how religious you are in every way. For as I was walking through your city I saw a shrine, "to an unknown god." Right away, Paul is signaling to the Athenians that he values them enough to observe and learn about them, and he pays them a sincere compliment.

And once Paul has established his credibility, ones he has shown his Athenian neighbors that he's not just a "babbler," he begins to lay out the connections between what he has observed in the culture and what he knows to be true about the gospel of Jesus Christ. When he says, "What you proclaim as unknown, I proclaim to you is known to us in the God of Israel," he says. When he says, "All life springs from him and in him we live and move and have our being," that's a line directly out of Epicurean Greek philosophy.

And so Paul lays out all of these connections. And I can almost see all of these people there nodding their heads and stroking their beards. He's got

them interested. Paul is telling them about how this thing they've been longing for, this hunger they've been feeling deep inside, isn't unknown or unknowable. It's real. It's present. It's made known in Jesus of Nazareth.

And the people are leaning in. They're interested. And then Paul says, "And of this he has given us assurance by raising him from the dead."

And that's where the train left the tracks. When they heard about the resurrection, most of them scoffed. A few said, "Give us your card. We want to hear more about this." But for most of them, it was at the resurrection of the dead where Paul lost them.

And if you've been paying attention at all as we've been reading Luke and Acts this year, that shouldn't be all that not surprising to you. Remember, the disciples had been with Jesus for all three years of his earthly ministry. On that first Easter morning, of all the people in the world, these eleven men were in the best position to understand resurrection. But on that first Easter morning, when the women returned from the cemetery and told them that they had seen the Lord very much alive, they called their story a Greek word that I can't repeat in polite company.

But when those Athenians scoffed, notice what Paul did not do. He did not chastise them about how all of their ideas were wrong. He did not threaten them or try to scare them. Paul simply confessed to them what he knew

to be true. And then he moved on. He had done what he had come to do, and it was time to go on to the next thing.

It wasn't a total strikeout in terms of numbers of new believers, but it wasn't one of those days when thousands of people were added to their number, either. But Paul wasn't worried about numerical success – he was worried about being faithful to the calling of the Holy Spirit on his life.

IV

My friend, the culture around us is changing so rapidly, our world is growing so much smaller and more interconnected, we're having so many more opportunities to encounter difference in our everyday lives, that I imagine that sometimes, it can feel like we're navigating an entirely different world than the one with which we're most familiar.

I know from my own experience that encountering difference can be challenging, even distressing. The text says that Paul was deeply distressed by some of what he observed in the culture around him. You don't have to like all the changes that have come and will continue to come your way.

But I hope, my friend, we'll pay attention to Paul's example. Paul understood an important truth in every human relationship, a truth that our friends in Young Life understand very well – you have to earn the right to be heard.

And so when you encounter difference, my friend, whether that difference is along political or religious or racial lines, I hope you'll remember this truth – that despite all our differences, despite all the ways in which we like to divide and classify ourselves, despite our culture's tendency to vilify and demonize those who are different, we have far more in common with our fellow human beings than we are led to believe. The points of commonality and connection and intersection are there if we'll but be kind and brave and grace-filled enough to look for them.

But we should also note that Paul was not afraid or embarrassed to turn the conversation to Jesus. Paul didn't pull any punches when it came time to share with the Athenians what he had seen and heard and knew to be true about Jesus of Nazareth. In short, when the time was right, he gave his testimony.

I don't know about you, my friend, but most Presbyterian Christians that I know get anxious when they hear their preachers talk about giving "testimony." We Presbyterian Christians have often been stereotyped as the "frozen chosen," and the list of things we'd rather do in the name of Jesus than "giving our testimony" is very long.

But it need not be so, my friend. And if you think about it, you give your testimony to your neighbors and colleagues about other things all the

time. You tell your friends and neighbors all the time about why this particular restaurant is your favorite, or why they should watch this particular show, or why this particular team is superior to that one. You give your testimony to your world about trivial things without even thinking about it.

And so let me ask you this. In this day in which you live, in this culture in which you live, in this world that seems to live by the notion that might makes right, and look out for number one, and he who dies with the most toys wins, and it doesn't really matter how you treat your neighbors so long as you get yours, in this world that keeps turning away from God and toward idolatry and tyranny, what could be more important to your world than your testimony about what you have seen and heard and know to be true about Jesus of Nazareth?

Your world needs to hear from you that the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth makes all the difference, not only after you die, but in the here and now. Your world is desperate for the good news of the gospel, my friend, whether your world knows it or not.

And yes, some, perhaps most, when you testify about Jesus, will scoff. Some might say, "Let's talk about this another time." That's OK. Your job is to be a witness, not a salesman. Someday, when you stand before the throne of God, you will not be rewarded or punished based on how many units of

faith you sold. You will be evaluated on the faithfulness, or lack thereof, of your testimony. On the last hour of the last day of Jesus' earthly ministry, every one of his disciples had fled, and just his mother and a few other women were still close enough to see and hear him. In the kingdom of God, faithfulness is more important than numerical success.

V

So here at First Presbyterian Church, we have just embarked on our third century of mission and ministry here in Athens, Georgia. And we can say with some certainty is that in the years to come Athens and the world beyond will continue become more and more diverse.

And that means that in the years to come, all of us are going to find ourselves having more and more conversations with people who are unfamiliar with the Christian story. And so in the years to come, it will be ever more important that we are excellent students of the culture around us, not as arrogant critics, but as faithful detectives, looking carefully for the places of connection between our culture and the biblical story.

But we also must always remember who and whose we are. We are disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ, the Messiah. We call him Savior and Lord. We believe that he is the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meet. We believe that he is the Son of the Living God, the firstborn of all creation and the

firstborn of the dead, who has called us to be his body, his hands and feet on earth, not as his sales team, but as his faithful witnesses. We believe that God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good, and God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged in righteousness, and of this God has given assurance to all by raising Jesus from the dead.

As we believe, so may we live faithfully, until he comes again.