

An Unknown God

Acts 17:22-28

I want to begin by saying that it's great to be back from vacation...again... Thanks to everyone who filled in and pitched in while I was gone. We went to Galena, to House on the Rock, and to the Renaissance Fair. Oddly enough, those are all things we hadn't done before, even though we've lived here for ten years.

We ended our vacation at Hotel Rome in Wisconsin Dells. It was actually a little nostalgic for me. Ten years ago this summer, when I first came here, a group of folks went up there from the church. That was the first time I had been up to Wisconsin Dells even though I heard a lot about the place while I lived in Illinois.

We went to a water park called Family Land, which is now Mt. Olympus. I was immediately drawn to what looked like the highest, steepest waterslide I had ever seen. My wife wouldn't get anywhere near it, but Linda Wellerritter and I decided to be brave. We were both in our mid thirties and unafraid of death at the time.

We both rode down that slide that day. We both loved and feared that slide. So last Sunday when I was there again I decided to ride that slide again, just out of nostalgia. I climbed up the stairs and waited in line.

When my turn came I got on there. The lifeguard told me to cross my legs and my arms. Then she gave me a shove and down I went. All I can tell you is that the velocity I reached and the friction I created were both painful and thrilling.

When I got to the bottom I stood up, trying to regain my composure. All of a sudden it felt a lot breezier than I remembered. My suit didn't seem to fit the way it had before. I looked down and saw that the torque created by my rapid descent had caused my swimsuit to rip – about twelve inches up my right thigh. Those of you who are my friends on Facebook have seen the image I posted.

Some woman sitting next to the slide gasped, not so much in horror from seeing my pasty thigh, but from imagining what kind of melee might have caused such destruction. Michelle was also waiting for me at the bottom. When she saw it she just started laughing at me.

We went to the shop right there at the water park and, fortunately, they had a bunch of suits on clearance. The woman at the counter said that happens a lot to guys who go down that waterslide.

I suggested to her that they rename the slide “The Shredder”, and maybe post a sign on there warning people that they may end up showing a little more skin than they intended by the time they get to the bottom of it.

I imagine that's how Paul felt as he left this place called The Areopagus after his speech in Acts 17. Like me, Paul went into what he considered “the belly of the beast”, with the best of intentions. Like me, Paul came out both exhilarated and embarrassed.

Before I explain why I say that, let me give you some background on this passage. The book of Acts is a sequel, the second volume written by Luke following the Gospel of Luke. In the **gospel** Luke focuses on Jesus and how he went around telling people that God wanted to be reconciled with the world.

Jesus was not well received in his lifetime, and was, in fact, killed for doing good. But Jesus came back from the dead, went up to heaven, and had promised to return from heaven so that he could reward the people who responded to his message and punish the people who rejected it.

In Acts, Luke tells us about Jesus' followers, the most prominent among whom is Paul. Paul is originally an enemy of Jesus' followers who goes around arresting them and trying to put them in jail. But Paul also sees the resurrected Jesus and becomes Christianity's greatest champion.

Paul is convinced that before Jesus returns, God wants him and Jesus' other followers to go all over the world telling people about what God has done through Jesus. That way everyone has a chance to accept or reject Jesus. Acts is really about how Paul eventually takes Jesus' message to the capital of what was considered the greatest power in the world at that time: Rome.

On his way to doing that, Paul goes to a number of important cities and tells people about Jesus. Other than Rome, the most important was a city named Corinth. But another important place he goes is the ancient city of Athens in Greece.

A few hundred years earlier Athens was probably the most important city in that part of the world. It was known for its intellectual tradition. It was where people like Plato and Aristotle taught philosophy.

By the time that Paul gets there, Athens is not as important as it used to be. But Luke still regards it as the ultimate test of Christianity as it competed with other world religions.

Luke's readers knew that if Paul could hold his own with the intellectuals in Athens, then Christianity could no longer be dismissed as some baseless upstart religion with no basis in reason. Luke wants his readers to know that this religion he's writing about is no slouch.

Paul is in Athens waiting for a couple of co-workers to meet him. He walks through this area of Athens called the Areopagus. It's named after Ares, the god of war in Greek religion.

This was a place where people had debated religion and philosophy for hundreds of years. As Paul went through Athens he saw all kinds of statues that had been erected to honor the many gods of Greek religion.

One statue in particular caught his eye: it was a statue to an unknown god. Apparently they didn't want any of the gods to feel left out, so they erected a statue to an unknown god just in case there were any that they didn't know about.

When Paul saw that statue, it gave him an idea. He was faced with the challenge of how to present the message of Jesus to people who had never heard of Jesus and would not be interested in any religion that originated in Israel.

Paul had been debating in the marketplace with a couple of groups who were well established in town. One was a group called the Epicureans. They were followers of a philosophy taught hundreds of years earlier by a guy named Epicurus.

I'm not going to burden you with all the details of what they thought. But what you need to know as you read Paul's speech here is that they did not believe the gods had anything to do with humanity. They didn't believe the gods were good, they didn't believe that the gods punished people for doing wrong.

And they didn't believe in life after death. When you died, you died. You didn't have to worry about coming back to life or being eternally punished for the bad things you did during your life. As you can imagine, Paul disagreed with them entirely on those things.

The other group Luke tells us about is the Stoics. We usually hear that word as describing someone who has no emotional reaction to a tragic event. The Stoics indeed did not believe in getting overly emotional when something bad happened. They also didn't believe in getting overly joyful when something good happened.

In fact, Paul sounds a lot like them in Philippians 4 when he says he's learned to be content no matter how good or how bad things are for him. Paul also agrees with them on a number of other points.

They believed that the gods were active in the affairs of the world, that the gods provided food for people through the growing of crops and livestock. They believed that the gods got angry when someone did something wrong, and that the gods would punish wrongdoers.

They believed that the soul lived on after death, which is what many Christians still believe today. So when Paul made this speech, the Stoics found much of what he had to say in line with what they already thought. **Slide**

When Paul made his speech in front of all these people, he said to them, "You know, I noticed this statue to an unknown god. I realize you don't know who this god is, so I'm going to tell you about that god."

He proceeded to tell them that this god they didn't know about created the world, and doesn't need to have statues and doesn't need anyone to do anything for God. Paul says that like many Greek folks, he considers himself a child of God.

The unknown god that Paul tells them about has been patient with the world in the past because they didn't know about God. But now God is sending people like Paul out to tell everyone in the world so that they will stop doing evil to one another.

Paul tells his listeners that the unknown god will send someone, Jesus that is, to judge everyone in the world on the basis of how they've lived their lives. And Paul says he knows that's the case because he has seen Jesus after God raised him from the dead.

Now as you may imagine, there were a couple of different responses to Paul's message. The Epicureans basically thought he was babbling, especially since they didn't buy his claim that

someone came back from the dead. They also didn't think that any god would care as much about the world as Paul claimed.

The Stoics, on the other hand, wanted to hear some more, although they weren't really all that impressed. There were some folks who were convinced by what he said, and they became Jesus' followers.

This story describes Paul as being somewhat victorious in his debate with some of the great intellectuals of Athens. It establishes Christianity as the greatest religion in the world, one that confounds even the most sophisticated experts in religion.

But I think the value of this passage for us lies in what it teaches us about our mission, which is the same as Paul's. We are entrusted with telling the whole world, starting with our own community, that God wants to be reconciled with the world, that God hates evil and demands justice, that salvation is possible through the person of Jesus.

That's exactly what Paul set out to do. And there are two things we can learn from this passage about how to do it. The first thing I want to highlight is that in whatever way you share your faith with other people, whether it's through talking to people about Jesus or simply modeling his actions in your own life, you have to be prepared for the fact that you're going to win some and you're going to lose some.

You will meet a lot of people who, for whatever reason, will never get it. They just won't be convinced of the value of Jesus no matter what you do. In fact, as was with the case with Paul, some people will be critical of you. Some people will accuse you of being a hypocrite. Some people will think you have some ulterior motive.

And since we're all fallible human beings they might be right sometimes. They may even cause us to doubt ourselves. And because of that, there will be times when you just want to give up and stop.

Paul never gave up. He knew some people would not be convinced. Anyone who tries to even act like Jesus has to expect that. If you fall down, get back up and try to do better the next time. But don't expect to win everyone over and don't expect to be perfect every day for the rest of your life.

The other thing that's important to learn from this passage is that we have to really think about how to communicate with people in a way that will *allow them to be receptive to what we have to say*.

Paul didn't just stand up there and say, "I'm going to tell you all about Jesus and if you don't like it, you can just burn." He realized it was his responsibility to figure out how to say it in such a way that they could understand. He saw that statue to an unknown god and knew that this was a way he could enter into a real conversation with them.

He used that as a tool to get through to them. It was something they could relate to. He was speaking their language. He had to because he had come into "their house" so to speak.

We need to always be thinking of new ways to communicate that message. What many people fail to grasp is that we are in a world where the way people communicate with each other has fundamentally changed forever.

We used to think that radio and then television were world changing modes of communication that reached wider audiences than ever before. And they were. But with the advent of computers, and especially the ability of cell phones to connect with computers, people interact in a totally different way now.

Right now the dominant way to communicate with other people about what you think is important is through Facebook and Twitter. These internet sites allow you to let your friends know exactly what's happening instantly, all around the world.

You can post pictures of what's happening, you can post videos of what happened, and you can tell people about another place on the internet where they can find out something that you want to tell them.

You can only imagine what the business world has done with this technology. It allows them to communicate quickly and easily and instantly with their customers without paying for it.

In the past people kept their phone numbers secret because they didn't want businesses calling them. Now people use Facebook to communicate with businesses and tell businesses to send them information on special deals, coupons and events. So you only hear from the people you want to hear from.

Almost everyone under the age of forty is on one or both of those. And they're not just on them, they're on them daily, multiple times. Just think about what the church could do with that kind of technology.

Instead of just sending e-mails we can now send text messages or Facebook updates, which will go right to peoples' cell phones. Kim has begun sending out daily Facebook messages to everyone who "likes" our Facebook page.

All our announcements, all our meetings, they go right to peoples' cell phones rather than waiting for people to come home, sit down at the computer and read their e-mails. I posted pictures from VBS as it was happening. I posted pictures of the stuff we donated through the Jericho Road partners project.

We post the menu for Catered Wednesday. I personally text message people from my cell phone inviting them to Catered Wednesday every month. I do the same when we have a children's activity. I know this all sounds a little crazy to folks who are used to just talking to people on the phone. But like I said, cell phones have changed the way we talk to one another, and it's never going to change back.

Here's what I finally came to realize: people are usually too busy to talk to me on the phone because they have to stop what they're doing and just focus on what I have to say. They can't really do anything else when they're talking to me.

These days people find that form of communication too restrictive. People at the phone companies have announced that for the first time people are using text messaging more than they are talking on the phone.

They are too busy to talk to each other on the phone. But they are more than happy to receive a text message from me that they can read in two seconds. They will get back to me at their convenience if they want.

Some churches have made great use of this technology, while others have resisted it. And there is something lost in the fact that we don't talk directly to each other like we used to. We can't see the expressions on each others' faces or hear the intonations in each others' voices.

But we will not see a day when this trend is reversed. It's like the statue to an unknown god – it's a powerful tool to communicate with people in a way that makes them receptive to what we have to say about Jesus.

Illustration: Delivering Packets of information to new residents.

I kind of felt like a failure after that experience. People swore up and down that we would get new folks to come to the church. And people still contact me trying to sell me the addresses of new residents.

But that dog just isn't going to hunt anymore. We have to embrace new ways of doing things sometimes if we want to be effective in our mission.

Like Paul, sometimes we're going to win people over and other times people will tell us very quickly to get lost. All we can do is pick up, dust ourselves off, and try to find another way to tell people what we've found in the person of Jesus.

God still wants to be reconciled to this world. God has chosen us to carry out that message. The tools we have to do that mission are drastically different from the ones we had when I was a kid. But when I was a young man people used those tools to reach me. And I hope we can use our new tools to reach others with the good news.