**With Whom Can I Share the Good News?**

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May 14, 2023 Acts 17: 22-34; John 14: 15-21

Every Sunday our worship comes to life with phrases, images and melodies that make participating a rich experience, here or online. Much of our service language is comfortingly familiar, but we can also appreciate the occasional surprise that stretches our understanding of the ways in which God speaks to us.

A surprise appeared a few months ago. Did you notice? New words are addressed to us in the Prayer after Communion. As the congregation gives thanks and awaits a blessing, the presider now says: “As we are gathered, fed and sent by God, let us ask ourselves: with whom can I share the Good News? Whom will I invite to join us at this table?”

Perhaps like some of you, I’ve greeted this message with a mixture of gratitude and hesitation. The new words go further than a call to go out together to love and serve God. Being asked to share the good news and to invite someone to join us can be both an opportunity to embrace, and an assignment to defer.

Our culture often seems, at best, indifferent to ideas about faith and, at worst, uneasy. The share of people identifying as Christian has been falling while the share professing no faith is rising. The idea of religion as a trustworthy, unifying and relevant force is on the decline. Talking about faith is seen as risky, even off-putting: one survey has found that 74 percent of the U.S. public feel very comfortable talking about the weather with people we don’t know well, compared to 24 percent who feel that way about religion. Even that number strikes me as high.

Talking about faith was certainly risky for Jesus’ earliest followers. Nonetheless, they embrace the question “with whom can I share the good news?” We join them today in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. In this lively, absorbing, adventure-filled saga, the disciples carry on after the risen Jesus ascends to heaven promising “…you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses…to the end of the earth” (Acts 1: 7-8).

The story sweeps us along from Jerusalem through surrounding regions and across the Mediterranean. The men and women we travel with are transformed by their conviction about Jesus: that he came as God’s Messiah to show the world a new way to live, was crucified, and yet has been raised from the dead, reigning now as Lord over all. This revolutionary idea runs counter to the religious, political and cultural norms of the ancient world.

Their claim about Jesus is an audacious one to make to people whose ideas about religion are settled, especially in Roman colonies where emperor worship is the law. Yet Jesus’ followers go forth, undaunted-- teaching, preaching, healing the sick and designing a common life guided by a communitarian ethic.

They win new converts but also meet hostility. Seen as threatening the established order, opponents refer to them as “these people who have been turning the world upside down” (17:6).

Led by Paul, they arrive in Athens, the world’s oldest “university town” --a center of intellectual, philosophical and religious inquiry. It’s hard to imagine a tougher crowd to which to introduce the gospel. Paul’s wisdom, eloquence and passion have made him an indispensable leader. Yet he can come across as impatient, long-winded and provocative. He isn’t one to strike up a conversation about the weather. His friends must be nervous about how Paul and the Athenians will react to one another.

And sure enough, entering the city and seeing the proliferation of statues dedicated to idols, Paul is angry. There is no room for multiple gods and goddesses in Paul’s world view, and he begins a debate about idol worship that rankles the elite of Athens. In the verses just prior to today’s, they call Paul a “babbler” and accuse him of breaking the law as “a proclaimer of foreign divinities” (17:18).

They tell Paul “(your) new teaching…sounds strange to us…we would like to know what it means” (17: 20). So he is brought to the Areopagus, a hilltop meeting place where the city’s most prestigious tribunal holds court. There is a lot at stake for Paul and his fellow missionaries in this encounter. I doubt if you and I will ever be called before a tribunal to explain our beliefs. But if a friend, neighbor or family member not connected to a church were ever open to hearing what faith means in our lives, would we be ready?

Paul is ready. His speech to the Athenians is denser and more assertive than what I might say to introduce others to the faith. We probably wouldn’t circulate Paul’s message at the corner of 42nd and Albemarle as an incentive for people to join us.

And yet there’s a valuable lesson in the approach Paul takes. We might expect that Paul, facing people whose view of religion is, to him, offensive, would denounce or ridicule their practices before he shares the Jesus story.

But instead, Paul looks for common ground. Like Jesus’ followers, the Athenians have yearned for truth and security from a source outside themselves. Paul notices that among the shrines honoring various deities, one is dedicated “to an unknown god” (17: 23) apparently so that no source of divine power will go unacknowledged in Athens. Paul sees this as a sign that the religious life they have is not enough for them**.**

Affirming their search for meaning, Paul says their “unknown god” is the One he has come to proclaim. This creator God is powerful, like the Greeks’ gods, but is also a relational God who, Paul says, “is not far from each one of us,” (17: 27).

He quotes from a renowned Greek poet to affirm that God’s presence dwells not in human-made objects but within us: “In him we live and move and have our being…for we are (God’s) offspring” (17: 28). We can hear echoes of this ancient Greek understanding of divine closeness in Jesus’ words of assurance to the disciples in today’s gospel: “…you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14: 20).

Those listening skeptically at the Areopagus might be starting to wonder: is Paul’s experience of faith really so far off from our own? Instead of starting from where he is, Paul meets them where they are. He respectfully points to aspects of their culture that are compatible with his message. His God may not be so “foreign” after all.

Paul being Paul, he can’t rest there. He calls on them to repent and prepare to live in the new world governed by Jesus, whom God has appointed “by raising him from the dead” (17:31). The idea of resurrection is too bizarre for most of these Greeks to accept; it remains a speed bump for some of us today. And yet, Paul’s visit to Athens has been a net plus for the Jesus movement: while some scoff at Paul, others say “we will hear you again about this…and some join him, (becoming) believers” (17: 33).

This story reminds us that Jesus’ call to spread the good news is fulfilled not only in triumphant leaps but in small, tentative steps. I expect we know people who have encountered Christianity at one time or another but have kept their distance from church life, while others have said “I’m curious. I’ll keep the door open and will hear you again about this.” Maybe your presence this morning reflects this readiness to keep listening. If so, welcome!

How can we continue to share the good news even more widely at St. Columba’s? We, and the people we know, aren’t so different from those in Paul’s audience of scoffers, non-committers and joiners. We name and relate to God in diverse ways, and we don’t necessarily understand or embrace every verse of the Bible or every phrase said in worship. But we yearn for the love and justice of God to enter our lives and to flow through us to others who wait for God’s light.

I’ve been blessed to hear a number of your faith stories. Some of us who once dismissed the idea of belonging to a church are now engaged as active members. We kept the door open until an invitation came along that met us and got our attention during a season of searching. Maybe, like the Athenians, we sought an unknown God to fill our need for truth, love and purpose in ways that the world alone cannot satisfy.

And here at St. Columba’s we’ve discovered a place where what we are seeking matters to God and to one another. This is good news worth sharing. You and I have the opportunity to invite others to discover what life in this community might mean to them and to the reconciling work of Jesus. Although it can feel risky talking with someone about the good news, let alone inviting them to church, if we follow Paul’s example and meet them where they are, the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

As scholar Judy Fentress-Williams reminds us, the main character in the Acts of the Apostles is not Paul or Peter or any of the individuals in the story but, rather, the Holy Spirit. In this story about the Acts of the Holy Spirit, the people play supporting roles\*. It’s up to us to offer an invitation but not to own the outcome.

One of my happiest experiences at St. Columba’s has been the year I spent exploring the Acts of the Apostles with a Bible study group. It’s a great narrative! But when Acts came to an end we felt let down, because the book offers no conclusion as to what happens for Paul, Peter and Jesus’ other followers. This, as Dr. Fentress-Williams observes, “is a reminder that the work of the Holy Spirit with which the story began is unending.”\* And now, my friends, is our chance to write the next chapter.

Amen.

\*Source cited: Judy Fentress-Williams, *Holy Imagination: A Literary and Theological Introduction to the Whole Bible*; 2021, Abington Press, p. 297