

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON
Sunday May 15, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce**

Reading: Acts 17:22-34

Sermon: Paul's Best Sermon (Easter 6 Narrative Lectionary)

Are you someone who likes to travel? To find yourself in new places, maybe even ones where you don't speak the language or you have to study the local culture before you stop putting your foot in your mouth?

I remember when I first moved to Saskatchewan and attended a powwow at one of the communities I was serving. I saw the printed schedule, noted the time for a particular ceremony, made sure I was early enough to find my way – and then sat in the sun for a very long time while people drifted in. Finally I saw someone I knew and asked her: "When do you think this will start?" And she just said "When everyone gets here."

That was one of the first times I realized that I came from a certain culture, and that I was bringing my own cultural expectations into this new to me culture. I soon learned that things just don't start until everyone can be included – it was always worth the wait.

The scripture story that Barbara read just a few minutes ago is the story of the apostle Paul, who has landed in Athens on one of his missionary journeys to the gentiles. The setting for this story is that Athens was known as a place of learning and political debate and philosophical discourse in the ancient world. Rome may have been the ruling empire, but Athens was known for its intelligentsia and learning.

Paul set out to try to convert some of those bright minds and great thinkers to follow Jesus. As usual, he started out in the synagogue with his fellow Jews.

But when he was thrown out of there, he found his way to the public square to preach and debate with the local philosophers and teachers. They quickly dismissed him as a chatterbox, but someone said to him: You need to go to the Areopagus – that is where the real thinkers gather. Then we will listen and decide what we think of your message.

This rocky hill represents the Areopagus of Athens. There is very little still there of whatever original structure once housed this meeting of great minds. And yet the Areopagus remains the symbol of deep conversation, challenging discussion and profound wisdom.

So it is at this place that Paul might have preached what I consider to be one of his best sermons. To be clear, Paul had arrived in Athens with some great expectations, only to find himself met by rejection from the synagogue, ridicule from philosophers, and his own personal horror at the number of religious idols and shrines which seemed to be set up everywhere he went in the city.

So it is amazing to me the way that Paul managed to reframe and channel all those negative responses into the very positive opening of this great sermon. Like my preaching instructor at theological college told us over and over again – The first job of the preacher is to build a bridge from the pulpit to the congregation. Connect with them. Find common ground you share with them. Only when that connection is established do you begin sharing what it is YOU want to share. And I think you will find that you have learned as much as they will.

So that is what Paul did. Instead of condemning their idols, he complimented them: “I see that you Athenians are deeply religious people” he began. “While I was admiring your shrines, I even found one inscribed to honour the Unknown God. Today, I am honoured to have this opportunity to share with you who I think that unknown God might be...”

Then Paul acknowledged that God, in all holiness, is much bigger than anything we can define with our human minds or possibly build into an idol or shrine. God is the source of all life, and the source of all that we need to live.

So we are not bound to rituals of offering statues food and sacrifice, but only to seek God wherever God may be found. Then to find that God is already in our midst, that God is already as close as our own breathing.

Paul said: it is your own philosophers who described God this way: “the One in whom we live and move and have our being.” Isn’t that beautiful?? And here is something else you already know, for your own poets have already said these words: “We too are children of God.”

Paul was building that bridge between the gospel that he wanted to proclaim in Athens, and the faith that was already in that place. He began with respect for the people and the traditions already in that place, before he added the something new to open up their perspective.

I like to think of this as Paul’s best sermon, and I really wish that the Christian church had maintained that characteristic humility of listening and learning from the locals when they came to share the good news in a new place.

However, as we know from the Christian story, listening and learning soon took a back seat to proclamation and proselytization, to Inquisition and Crusade, to colonization and genocide.

By the time it came to the Council of Nicaea in 325, there were already winners and losers, resulting in some pretty inflexible definitions of who was orthodox and who were heretics. This is a pattern that continued

- into the schism between the Roman and the Eastern Orthodox churches, who separated from Rome, following its patriarch at Constantinople.
- Then again at the Council of Whitby – which suppressed the Celtic spirituality that was influencing Christianity in Britain, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.
- We also have the Protestant reformation, with Martin Luther’s 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg chapel – and the formation of the protestant Anglican church at Westminster. Both of those led to long and bloody conflicts over who was right and who was wrong.

Part of conflict in all of those separations and schisms was the use of vernacular languages both in worship and for reading or studying scripture. Not only did the church fail to grasp the importance of growing into new cultural images – it wouldn’t even let them speak about God in their mother tongue.

It seems silly to us now – in our global, pluralistic society we take things like translation and cultural accommodations for granted. We recognize that the church needs to change, or else die, or possibly become some sort of museum to our familiar history.

So what do we need to do now? How do we, in the Christian community, build that bridge to the intercultural, interconnected, internet dependent context in which we find ourselves in 2022?

I attended a workshop a while ago, and the presenter talked about his new “office”. It was pre-pandemic, so you might need to use your imagination (slide 2).

He would take his laptop to the nearest coffee shop, find himself a table and from there write his sermon, or plan his bible studies, or do his correspondence – spending probably 2 or 3 hours there a week. He said it gave him a whole new perspective on the neighbourhood where he was in ministry.

Sometimes other patrons of the coffee shop would ask if they could share the table, and set up with their own laptops. Sometimes he would ask them what they were working on. And he would tell them what he was working on. If they didn’t run away at the word “church” or “minister”, he ended up having some pretty interesting conversations.

The goal, as he said, was not to get the (mostly) young people he met at the coffee shop into his church. The goal was to get himself out of the church, and to be immersed in the ethos of another generation.

I thought of him when I read about Paul going to the Areopagus. Yes, he eventually got to share his version of the gospel with them. But he also got to hear and to learn what they already held to be holy, deep in their hearts. Then he tried to connect his understanding of the gospel story with their life stories.

So where is the Areopagus for us today? The meeting place, the place where ideas are exchanged and people listen to each other and grow their own ideas and faith amongst a diversity of voices?

Slide 3 – is it the coffee shop? Because you know they aren’t just about the coffee!

Slide 4 – is it somewhere on social media? Lots of ideas are exchanged on Twitter and Facebook and all the other social media sites. It may not be the best place for dialogue, but an excellent venue for discovering what other people are interested in.

Slide 5 – maybe it’s before or after that yoga class – in that time of meditation and deep breathing, maybe that’s where we will find the bridge to talking about what gives us hope.

Slide 6 – or perhaps it’s in the great outdoors, in conversation with other human inhabitants, of course, but also simply listening and learning from the natural world.

Numbers in churches are in decline – that’s what we hear. But faith and spirituality are not necessarily following the same downward trend. We just need to find a place to start building the bridge, beyond the walls of the traditional church.

That colleague who sat in the coffee shop heard some pretty amazing stories of faith from the people he met: some were disappointed in their church families because of rejection of the 2S1gbtq+ community, others only knew about church from stereotypes and thought they weren’t good enough to enter the doors. Some saw the church as hypocritical, because all they saw in the news were stories about sexual abuse scandals. Others found worship itself stale and outdated.

Whatever the issue was for them, my colleague learned a lot.

He would say it changed the way he did ministry. It changed how he defined his parish – his people were not just the people who came to church, or who signed up for a volunteer activity. With that new perspective, of what was going on in the world beyond the church building, it opened his eyes. It opened his eyes to a whole new understanding of God's work – and what God was already doing in the neighbourhood, without a church to bless or fund or identify with it.

Like Paul, once he had a broader understanding or appreciation for the place he had landed in, he had his Areopagus moment – and he never even had to say that he was a minister or came from such and such church, he only needed to quietly welcome and respect the people around him, and let God do the rest.

So thanks be to God, in whom we live and move and have our being. May we open our hearts to the power of God at work in the world, Amen.