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“PAUL’S OUTREACH STRATEGY”

Acts 17:16-34

In today’s text, while on his second missionary journey Paul faces a challenging audience – a group of Greek intellectuals in Athens. I think Athens had a great deal in common with nearby Berkeley. Both cities housed famous universities where intellectuals gathered to talk and debate new ideas. And while Sproul Plaza at Cal was the site of the beginning of the Free Speech Movement, Athens had the distinction of being the very cradle of democracy. Both were also marketplaces of religious and political ideas. Athens was a great center of philosophy. It was the native home of both Socrates and Plato and the adopted home of Aristotle. It was also home to first-century philosophers Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, and Epicurus, who gave his name to Epicureanism.

In Athens Paul first sought out his fellow and sister Hebrews and God-fearers in the synagogue. He dialogued with them and presented Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Then he moved

to the agora or marketplace, unearthed by American archeologists, to reach out to the Greek intellectuals. (read text – Acts 17:16-34, p.137 NT in pew Bibles)

While in the agora Paul debated with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. They asked, “What does this babbler want to say?” The Greek word translated “babbler” literally means “seed-picker”, used originally to describe birds picking up grain in their beaks. Later it described scrap collectors as they picked up junk. So the initial impression of Paul by these Athenian intellectuals is negative. They see him as a retailer of second-hand scraps of philosophy and religion, a religious “junk dealer.”

Others thought Paul was adding two new deities to the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods and goddesses when he mentioned the good news about “Jesus and his resurrection.” They understood resurrection, *anastasis* in Greek, to be Jesus’ female consort.

So they escorted Paul up the hill to the famous Athenian court known as the Areopagus and asked, “May we know what

this new teaching is, that you are presenting?” Notice how Paul responds to this invitation.

Paul is honest and direct. In contrast to polytheism (the belief in numerous gods and goddesses) or pantheism (when the divine is viewed as permeating all things), Paul proclaimed the one living and true God as the Creator of all things.

And this God is self-sufficient and is “not served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.” Since the Greek word for life, “*zoe*” was popularly associated with Zeus, the supreme Greek god, it is possible that Paul was saying indirectly, “Not Zeus but Yahweh is the true source of life.”

Paul closes his sermon by introducing Jesus Christ. He proclaims that while God has overlooked times of human ignorance in the past, now a new day has dawned in which God commands all people to repent. Paul warns that a day is coming when the person appointed by God (Jesus Christ) will judge all humankind. Finally, Paul says God has assured us of this by raising this Jesus from death. While most of Paul’s Greek

hearers, except the Epicureans, would have affirmed the idea of the immortality of the soul, Greeks rejected the notion of bodily resurrection and found it difficult to accept.

Had Paul been addressing a Hebrew audience, it was his practice to present Jesus as the promised Messiah and refer frequently to the Hebrew Old Testament for support. Wanting to communicate here with an intellectual Greek audience, Paul employs a distinctly different strategy. In our call to worship from Paul's First Letter to the Church in Corinth (9:22) he summarized his flexible, context-driven outreach strategy – "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel . . ."

First Paul is sensitive to the Greek culture which surrounds him and honors it. After observing the numerous idols and pagan monuments in Athens, he says, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way." As a committed Jew, he might have lashed out against these polytheistic pagans with an angry diatribe. Instead, he intentionally tries to be as positive as he can. Even if you can't approve of another person's beliefs or

behaviors, maybe you can affirm their yearnings or hopes or dreams which underlie those beliefs and behaviors.

Paul takes the Greek culture seriously and seeks common ground with his audience. Paul identifies with his audience by quoting from two of their Greek poets in his sermon – Epimenides and Eratus. He accommodates his presentation of the gospel to his audience and uses a minimum of in-house technical Christian jargon which this audience wouldn't understand.

What happens when the gospel is communicated without cultural sensitivity and without adequate explanation? A well meaning but clueless evangelist came to a simple cabin in the Appalachian mountains and knocked on the door. When a woman answered, he asked, "Do you have any Presbyterians around here?" "I don't think so," she said, "but my husband hunts and traps and skins all kinds of varmints and nails them to the barn wall. You can go look to see if he got one."

The evangelist responded judgmentally, "I can see that you are living in darkness." "Yes," she said, "I've been tryin' to get

ma husband John to cut me a window in the side of the house, but I can get him to do nothin'."

Undeterred the evangelist continued with his line of stock questions, "Did you know that Jesus Christ died for your sins?" "No, I didn't," she answered, "I live up in this holler, and I don't hear nothin'. Heck, I didn't even know he was sick!"

The point is that our language must be sensitive and appropriate to the particular audience we're trying to reach, especially when we're dealing with a cross-cultural challenge.

Second Paul addressed a felt need the Athenians had, given expressed by the monument which was dedicated to "an unknown god." He found in that altar a "connecting point" between Greek culture and his Christian message. That altar was like a religious insurance policy, since the Athenians might have overlooked one of the huge numbers of deities in their pantheon. This monument responded to the anxious question, "Have we inadvertently not provided for the worship of any god or goddess?" Paul uses that as the key theme of his sermon.

In his earthly ministry Jesus modeled communication designed to connect with his audience. To a group of Galilean fishermen Jesus issued an invitation to join his ministry with the words, “From now you will be catching people” (Luke 5:10).

After miraculously feeding 5000 hungry souls, he said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Having previously healed a man born blind, Jesus later told a crowd who knew of that miracle, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Three days after Lazarus died, Jesus arrived and restored his friend to life, and in the midst of mourners proclaimed, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live . . .” (John 11:25).

What is a “felt need” or “a point of contact” you can establish with an unchurched friend or spiritual seeker? If your friend is obsessed with financial security, you might present Jesus as the key to eternal security – now and in the life to

come. Of if someone has health issues, you might present Jesus as the “Great Physician.” If a person is struggling with ethics, talk about Jesus as the “Good Teacher.” Of if an inquirer cares deeply about the issues of peace and justice, present Jesus as “the Prince of Peace.”

What sort of outreach strategy did Paul employ with the Athenian intellectuals? First he was sensitive to his audience using language and ideas they knew about. Second Paul addressed a “felt need” of his hearers by explaining how the unknown god had revealed Himself God in the Risen Christ, the future judge of humankind. Friends, may we use a similar strategy as we share the good new about Christ today with unchurched people in our culture.

Let us pray: Lord, give us sensitivity and wisdom as we seek to be Your ambassadors and communicators of the good news of Your sinless life, Your sacrificial death and Your glorious resurrection all on our behalf! Guide us to use appropriate language, to be encouraging and positive, and to address the felt needs of our listeners. In Your Holy Name. Amen.