

MEADOWBROOK CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

“Rethinking the World”

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Acts 17: 22-31

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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. ²⁴The 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, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From 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, ²⁷so 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. ²⁸For “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.”

²⁹Since 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. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because 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.’

Laura’s regional work group gathered at Comerica Park last Tuesday night. If you know Laura, then you know that Comerica Park isn’t a place where she can be usually found. So I tried to prepare her for the evening and any conversation that she might encounter. You know, I wanted her to impress her bosses and co-workers with her baseball knowledge.

I started the conversation with this, “the Tigers are really having a disappointing season.” I knew right away I had Laura’s rapt attention. She rolled her eyes but I went on. “Now Miggy is hitting well I am troubled by his addiction problems. V-Mart should provide him some protection in the lineup but he keeps getting hurt. The rest of the starting lineup is just awful, hitting near or below the Mendoza line. They’re leaving too many runners in scoring position. While the Tigers have gotten lots of quality starts, the bullpen scares me. Papa Grande looks vulnerable, hitters are catching on to Albuquerque’s slider and with Coke a starter, there is no one stepping up to take the setup role. It doesn’t look good. Leyland is probably chain-smoking heaters in the dugout tunnel. It is going so bad, we are already looking up at the Tribe and the Pale Hose are hot on our tails!” Laura simply shook her head. I have a feeling that she will never get into the game at the same level that I am.

Communication is a difficult thing when two different kinds of languages are being used. Communication is next to impossible when ideas from two different worlds collide. My preaching instructor in seminary began our first class session by saying, “When you preach a sermon, always try to start at a place where the listeners are. Find a common ground.” Jesus was good at this, teaching parables using common experiences like weddings and planting seeds.

Japanese preacher Kosuke Koyama wrote of his missionary experience in Thailand. He said, "On my way to the country church, I never fail to see a herd of water buffaloes grazing in the muddy paddy field... It reminds me that the people to whom I am to bring the gospel of Christ spend most of their time with these water buffaloes in the rice field. The animals tell me that I must preach to these farmers in simple sentence structure and thought development. They remind me to use objects that are immediately tangible like 'sticky rice,' 'banana,' 'dog,' 'rainy season,' 'leaky house,' and 'stomachache.' These are meaningful words for them."

If you want to teach someone something new or unfamiliar, you must use words, stories, and situations which are known or familiar. Otherwise every teaching will sound like my conversation with Laura, a bunch of baseball babble.

I think that is what the apostle Paul was trying to do during his now-famous sermon on the streets of the cosmopolitan city of Athens. Athens was the cradle of civilization. It was the center of sophisticated thought and education. It was something akin to a university town in our own time. Athens was also a city full of idols. Along its busy streets were idols to every god who could control and determine every situation imaginable. And just in case the people missed something, there was one idol dedicated to "the Unknown God."

Like a good preacher, Paul began by speaking their language, using intellectual words and logic they might understand. He talked about "the Unknown God." He flattered his listeners by telling them how religious they were. He appealed to their naturalist theology, speaking about common human origins and the changing of the seasons. He quoted from a popular poet of the day. He was logical and rational. At that point, he had his listeners eating from his hands. Even Paul's detractors must have been nodding their heads up and down with approval.

Then Paul messed it all up. He started speaking a different language, not literally but figuratively. He began to speak of religion on a more personal level. He talked of the importance of the experience of his faith. He spoke of the day when the whole world would be judged with justice by the means of a man who had been raised from the dead. He spoke of resurrection. He addressed something with which there was no rational foundation. And with that, the mood of the listeners changed. Some began to make fun of Paul. Other said that perhaps he needed to study the issue more before he spoke with such authority. Nobody seemed too persuaded, except for one man and one woman.

Paul's sermon that day seems to define a problem that perhaps each of us has with our faith. Like the good people of Athens, we yearn toward logic and reason. And faith requires a different language—a re-thinking of the world. We all seem to handle God really well when God is "out there." We can agree that God is the creator of the universe. We can understand that God is found in the stories of faith we read in the Bible. We can even accept the notion that God occasionally intervenes in the events of the world today. But like the Athenian perception, we are more comfortable when God is a more rational, distant thing—out there. We have a larger problem speaking the language and seeing our God in a more intimate dimension of reality that demands our choices and requires a risk.

We can handle most of the story of Jesus. We can understand a baby being born, even in a manger. We embrace a preacher who preaches wonderful sermons and a teacher who offers wise counsel and a healer who comforts the afflicted. But resurrection is entirely different. It is like a different language. It is not part of our experience. It is not part of our rational thinking. It is tough to re-think a world where we tend to accept death and ends and limits because they are part of our routine.

William Willimon writes that "we tend to think through the use of analogy. When something strange intrudes we try to explain it using a reference to the past saying 'Well, it is like when or it is like that,' but how do you think about things that have no analogy in your experience? In this world, what lives—dies, and what dies—stays that way. How am I to think of God's victory over death and defeat in the resurrection of Jesus?" At a certain point there is no

analogy. You must take the leap of faith. You must experience God not just in books and sermons but live with God in the moments of life.

That's about where Paul was with his teaching that day in Athens. He had gone about as far as he could in language and in experience with his listeners. They were willing to engage in exploring God as a concept but not as one who lays claim upon their lives and whose experience demanded new life within their own existence. At that point, he couldn't take them any further.

And maybe that's as far as any of us get during the Easter season. Resurrection is just too illogical and distant and confusing to get our minds around. We can try to make analogies of understanding, comparing God's action in the empty tomb to cocoons and butterflies or the budding trees of the spring. But the Easter event was more cosmic and certainly much more deep than that. In the resurrection of Jesus, God has acted to defeat those things which appear to be the end for us- death, despair, and defeat. In the resurrection of Jesus, we cling to a promise of everlasting life, of life living on- in whatever shape and form that eternal life may be for us. We proclaim these things not because we are experts and certainly not because we have experienced such things for ourselves. We proclaim them just as Paul did- because we believe!

Aquinas said, "Reason can take us only so far. Then faith is required, a gift, a grace, to enable comprehension."

As we near the close of this Easter season, we might search for a way to bring its meaning home to our hearts and our lives. To do that, we have to rethink the world. When it comes to Easter, our reason and experience can only take us so far. Eventually we have to fall back upon our faith and trust in future revelation. Easter is the realization that we have not come up with any new wisdom or knowledge or language to apply to our old earthly situations. Instead it is God who has brought something entirely new to us. So we seek not a new knowledge about an old world. We seek not an understanding based on our experience. What we seek is faith, a gift from God that reveals who we are and the promise of our world in a different way.