

*an unknown god*  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 21, 2017  
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Text: Acts 17; I Peter 3; John 14

Turns out this is a sermon on evangelism! – I didn't really know that when I started it, but that's what it turned out to be in the end – and I thought I should tell you, partly so you can have an idea of what to expect, but also to get a little credit for an evangelism sermon at Hope Church, since some might say such sermons aren't preached too often here – so I'd like it documented: 'May 21, 2017, a sermon on evangelism' – right here at Hope Church!

Evangelism may bring up lots of ideas to you, good and bad, or maybe that word means nothing to you at all! – evangelism is basically the sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ with others who are not Christians; and it's the way that is done, with aggression or grace, with pressure or with winsomeness, with liberation or oppression, with words or with deeds – it's that whole spectrum of what evangelism has been and is in Christianity that brings up such a range of reactions to "evangelism"; and I'm sure you have your own ideas and reactions, whether you've known it by that word or not. So we'll see how it goes with this evangelism sermon.

Where this sermon starts is with Paul's sermon – Paul's speech – in Athens, that we read about in Acts 17. Now I think there are all sorts of fascinating passages in the Bible, and maybe I say that too often about the texts I preach on, but I'm telling you, this one is remarkable – there is a whole lot going on here. I looked and realize I have only preached on this text a couple of times in my getting close to 30 parish years – I preached on it 15 years ago here at Hope Church...I'm sure you remember it well?!...but this is a text that I have often reflected on particularly as I have thought about what it means to be Christian in a world of many beliefs, many religions. Let's just review what happens in this story: Paul is journeying throughout the Roman empire as an evangelist, sharing and teaching the story of Jesus Christ – Paul has travelled through many cities, and now Paul is in Athens, a center of learning and

religion – and he comes to the Aeropagus, a gathering place in Athens that is a kind of soapbox setting for the sharing of ideas, and Paul holds forth: Paul compliments and critiques Greco-Roman religion; Paul gives an incredibly succinct theological tour de force on God and humanity; Paul appreciatively quotes a Greek poet about religion!; and Paul makes a call to repentance, to have the story of the Risen Christ turn people to live in God’s ways.

Why is it that I find this to be such a remarkable evangelism sermon from Paul? - because it seems to go against every negative association that I myself carry about evangelism. Why is it that I at the start of this sermon poked fun a bit about the perceived paucity of evangelism sermons at Hope Church? – because there are a lot of well-earned negative associations about evangelism - things like: judgmental, pressure, damnation, belittling of other religions, overbearing, intrusive, superior, exclusive. And since that is not the way I, or many other people, think that faith should be expressed, then it often seems that the alternative to such a history of evangelism is that it is best instead to say: ‘hey, anything goes – whatever anyone believes is fine – who am I, who are we, to judge?’ But that doesn’t sit well with me either – seems like we should be able to do better than reducing belief or life to an ‘I’m OK, you’re OK’ participation trophy. I think there’s plenty of beliefs that are harmful and we should be able to talk about that; and I want people to be able to call out such harmful things in me too; and there’s plenty that is good too from others also, to share and to receive, that I want to be a part of. And so it seems to me that what we hear from Paul is very different than the forced choice that is often given to us of either ‘in your face’ or ‘anything goes’ – what’s so important and profound in what Paul shares in this evangelism sermon is that it is a message full of both conviction and acceptance, of assertion and of searching, of confidence and humility, of challenge and of compassion. How was Paul able to do that? – to express faith with such gracious conviction?

Well, I have an idea about that, that I’ve been thinking about quite a bit lately, and I’d like to share it with you and see what you think. As Paul is speaking, preaching, evangelizing, there in Athens, as a Christian – think about the state of Christianity in the world at the time:

Christianity was a tiny, barely established, barely known group of people, with no power or privilege, no prestige or authority. That is the setting, the social location, of Christianity in all that we read in the New Testament – the letters and the Gospels are all written and woven together in a time when the Church is a tiny minority voice in the world. I think it is extremely difficult for us to try to know and feel what that was like, as we live at a location in our history and culture in which Christianity has had such a prominent and often dominant voice – very much about power and authority. So I've wondered what we could learn from realizing the minority position that Paul, Christians, the Church had in at that time – what difference it makes to be a minority voice. And what I think we can see is that this minority reality required that community of the faithful to live from its convictions rather than from its power, to live from its courage rather than its privilege, to live in humility rather than with hubris. Now I suppose that you could argue that the reason Paul speaks the way he does that day in Athens is because he HAS to just to play it safe – after all, when your team is that small, you better be nice to the big kids. But that actually doesn't ring true at all – the story of the early church is not one of playing it safe: that was not the case for the story of Stephen that we heard last week when he is stoned – it is not the story of Paul as he often suffers for his convictions - it was not the story of many in the church who were persecuted. The story of the early church is actually one that has both acceptance and rejection, persecution and support - but the point is that throughout what motivated and sustained these Christians was not power or privilege but their calling – a calling and conviction that could be said simply as one of making God known in God's world, of making known the God who has made God's self known in Jesus Christ.

So what if we tried that on for ourselves? – that in our particular time and location, that what is at the heart of our faith is to live from such a motivation: simply to make God known as best we can – a faith that echoes Paul in Acts 17: witnessing to God as the Creator of this earth and all that is in it; witnessing to humanity as one family; witnessing to the human spirit reaching for God, and God's Spirit among us (and as we do so, just as Paul quoted a Greek poet then: 'in God we live and move and have our being', we could connect with the spiritual

language of our culture – music and art and politics and religion and literature!) ; witnessing to the need for humanity, God’s children, to turn from harm to one another and turn to God’s ways of righteousness and life, the ways of resurrection that speak life over death – the ways of things like compassion and justice, integrity and peace. That’s Acts 17 - and it’s relevant very much today.

I mean, it sounds kind of good, doesn’t it? (let’s agree that this sounds pretty good, because it sets up the punch line that comes next – because it does resonate, doesn’t it? – God as Creator of all, and humanity called together to the ways of life). I think it does sound good, and then the punch line is that it means we’re all evangelists! Because whatever we or others may think of that terminology, the reality is that we as Christians are called by God to make God known – the good news that this world belongs to the God of life. And it is good news because we share this witness not from reliance on our own power or privilege, or out of judgment and superiority, but from a heart of gratitude for the gift of life, from a story of God’s presence in our lives in the Risen Christ, from the conviction that God’s gifts are to be shared with all God’s children – that is our calling.

How does that feel to you, being an evangelist? I wonder if it makes you a bit uncomfortable? I wonder if perhaps we are so used to being put off by our negative contemporary stereotypes of evangelism that we shy away from the genuine scriptural witness that is there, that is our foundation, of our calling to make God known. I think that does happen – which means that there is a need to renew an evangelism calling in a new way; and here’s where I especially find the good news in this calling that we have of sharing the good news: it is that as we recognize the minority voice that was the Early Church, which kept them grounded in conviction and courage, in gratitude and compassion – that when we see our call to evangelism in the same way, God uses it in our time to help us hear and resonate with the minority voices of our day. Rather than the places of power and privilege, this evangelism calling opens us to the voices of justice and suffering, voices on the margins speaking courage and wisdom; rather than separating people into in and out, this evangelism calling connects us

to others in a shared humanity, a shared yearning for wholeness, a shared need to turn to God's gifts of life. This calling connects us to the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the Spirit of life, at work in all places, voices, peoples, faiths, convictions that express courage, compassion, repentance and peace.

Paul in Athens speaks of "'an unknown god'"; Jesus in the Gospel of John says – "you know God!" – this is a remarkable thing! – Jesus Christ making known God's love, and giving the Advocate, the Spirit, to guide in truth. This is good news – not news that makes us better or that gives us power or privilege over, but good news that gives a calling and conviction, one that Christ describes as love – love of God and of neighbor. It really flips the script on evangelism: a witness to God's presence, purpose, calling in this world; such is the good news that this world – the powers and privileged, the cynical and despairing, the hoping and yearning – all need to hear. And as with Paul, some may scoff, and some may want to hear more, and some may come to believe - but whatever the response, God is using you, me, us, as a way of making God known. And as we do so, God will also be made more fully known to us not in power and privilege but in the voices of compassion and of creation, of justice and of love – for present there is the God in whom all live and move and have their being – thanks be to God. AMEN.