

## Acts 17:16-34

Today's story takes us to Athens, the cultural and intellectual capital of the ancient Mediterranean world. Luke tells us that Paul and his fellow travelers had visited synagogues in Thessalonica and Berea and met with hostility. So now Paul goes to Athens but does not confine himself to the synagogues. In fact, he goes to the Agora—the public square—and “argues” with whomever he can engage. I feel like I could have told him that arguing wouldn't get him anywhere, but Luke is quite specific with that verb, so I assume that's what he intended. Being the intellectual center of the universe, Athens was accustomed to a front-row seat to all debates. They tended to assign higher prestige to what was ancient, but at the same time, they were always wanted to hear the latest ideas, sort of like trying tuna flakes or plant-based protein just to see. This is how Gentiles ended up visiting synagogues, because Judaism was ancient and therefore intriguing, although the admission requirements were daunting. But today Paul ventures out from his familiar synagogue setting (which hasn't been working real well anyway), and tries out the Agora, which is teeming with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers as well as less easily-labeled seekers.

At first Paul is received as a dilettante. What the NRSV translates as “babbler” is apparently literally a “sandpicker,” someone who deals in trivialities. But enough people take an interest that they take him to the Areopagus and ask him to give a presentation. Upon which invitation, Paul gives a culturally sensitive introductory lecture—or at least, as culturally sensitive as he can muster.

He begins by affirming them as religious people, with plenty of objects of worship. Noting their shrine to an “unknown god,” he asserts that he knows who that god is, the God

who made all things that are. Paul does not refer to scripture or the patriarchs, which would be unfamiliar and hard to connect with. Rather, he refers to God as the one who made the world that all of us live in and know. God “from one ancestor made all nations to inhabit the whole earth.” So all of us, Jews and non-Jewish Athenians, are all one family. Unlike the gods they’re used to, who require sacrifice as the way they get *their* needs met, this God does not need our worship “since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.” What this God does want is for us to “search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” Paul even quotes the Greek poet Epimenides, who had written of Zeus that “in him we live and move and have our being.”

So Paul goes as far as he can to connect with the Athenians, to show them that he sees them, and to find common ground. Then he takes a deep breath and tells them the crazy part: God now calls all human beings to repent because he has fixed the day on which the whole world will be judged, and the sign of that is that he has raised a man from the dead. This is the point where people break off from the crowd and start drifting away, muttering to themselves about lunatics at large and what is this world coming to. But a few want to hear more, and of them, still fewer actually do join Paul as believers.

Paul did have to speak his truth. He started from a place of commonality, as best he could, but at a certain point he had to talk about resurrection and judgment, because those were core to his message as he understood it. And when that was just a little too much for some people, he had to let them drift off and accept that with them he had not succeeded.

First-century Athens has a lot in common with our culture. While Christianity is said to be the dominant religion, if you scratch the surface, it really isn’t. Lots of people identify as

Christian but it's not their passion, or it's not very alive for them. The expression for this is "functional atheism." Their real investment is in their family or patriotism or success; that's what's real and meaningful to them. It's probably somewhat the same for other faiths, except that it takes a little more affirmative energy to claim identity as a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist; those aren't default identities. But where I'm going with this is that functionally we really do live in kind of a "sandpicker" culture, a little like Athens in Paul's day.

Then there's the committed segment of our population, mostly conservative. The *New York Times* had an article on May 9 about a "seismic shift"<sup>i</sup> fracturing white evangelicals, as they divide into two broad camps: those embracing Trump-style messaging and politics, including references to conspiracy theories, and those seeking to navigate a different way. Forty-two percent of Protestant pastors said they had seriously considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year, according to a new survey by the evangelical pollster Barna. It is because of the intense politicization of society, and the ferocious longing for simplicity and unanimity.

So we find ourselves uneasily clinging to the identity of "Christian" in a society in which "Christian" signals "bigot" to the many seekers who do not have another religious identity. And we find ourselves having a truth that is difficult to speak because it is in such opposition to the default. Our truth is that following Jesus means welcoming the stranger, tolerating ambiguity, being generous rather than suspicious, challenging ourselves to lifelong learning and growing. I don't know if the name "Christian" has been irreparably damaged by colonialism and bigotry and enmeshment with the powers that be, but that is certainly what it signals—and yet we are called to follow Jesus. Like Paul, we struggle to convey our truth to a culture that kind of doesn't have a word for us.

Jennifer Mercieca, a historian of American political rhetoric at Texas A & M, recently wrote about how to defend democracy in this time of authoritarianism and falsehoods, and it strikes me that it is also a way for us to live out our calling from God in our peculiar cultural environment. Her first point is that each of us must look for ways to build trust: “Build trust between different sectors of society and different factions. Democracy thrives with bridge building, it erodes with distrust & cynicism.”

Another point is that we should support institutions, especially communal ones like libraries, food banks, schools. Support places where people connect.

She goes on: “Call people in, not out. We tend to want to shame those with whom we disagree, but authoritarians thrive with alienation. Shaming & shunning will drive people toward authoritarians. Call them in, befriend them. Build bridges. Bridges strengthen democracy.”

I’m going to skip a couple, but then this: “Communicate as a democrat. That means using persuasion, not compliance-gaining strategies. That means being open to new information, perspectives, values. It means being inclusive, not exclusive. Democracy is a way of life, it’s also a way of thinking and communicating.

“Finally, do not be cynical. Do not defeat democracy with your cynicism. Block or mute cynical people/accounts. Cynicism is not useful for a pro-democracy movement. Hope is necessary. We can do this. Make a plan for spreading democracy, focus on the practices.”

What all these have in common is a kind of hopeful gentleness, respect for the other, and a refusal to be afraid. You cannot accomplish democracy by force, and you cannot realize the kingdom of God by coercion or disgust. I love the idea of supporting the public library as an

act of discipleship, and seeing the library as a way for people to connect. Also this:

<https://www.ucc.org/city-must-cover-legal-costs-of-church-that-had-to-defend-public-use-of-its-parking->

[lot/?inf\\_contact\\_key=b3d8a3b5a1436514ccd8a6097a09a349cc0558ed5d4c28cbfab114022b1ec50d](https://www.ucc.org/city-must-cover-legal-costs-of-church-that-had-to-defend-public-use-of-its-parking-?inf_contact_key=b3d8a3b5a1436514ccd8a6097a09a349cc0558ed5d4c28cbfab114022b1ec50d)

The city objected to Pass-A-Grille’s practice of allowing users of [a popular nearby beach](#) to park cars on its lot. Parking is free, but the church accepts donations to support mission trips that are part of its youth program. The church’s young people are often there to greet the public, describe their mission work, and, if requested, even pray with the guests.

In [an 18-page analysis](#) of the case in 2021, Barber said the disagreement between the church and the city boiled down to one central point: “the sincerity of the church’s religious beliefs concerning its use of its parking lot.”

He noted that Pass-A-Grille’s senior minister, the Rev. Keith Haemmelmann, had testified that “permitting open and free parking to the public on its lot is guided by two of the church’s core values — stewardship and hospitality.”

People are so atomized, so fearful. Our energy should go toward connections, however attenuated they may have to be. Because here’s the other thing about Paul’s story: he didn’t fret about failing or succeeding, he just did the kingdom thing. He tried to learn about the people he was among, and spoke to them in a way that would make connections. Then he spoke about the part that was going to seem ridiculous, and some people flaked off—perhaps most of them. But Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Demaris and a few others believed him, and that was a real connection, one made without false promises or imaginary enemies, and it was a good connection. And it was enough.

I would like to turn around authoritarianism in my time, preferably by next month. But going fast and breaking things is not how the love of Christ works. Instead, we should take our

cue from Paul, who appreciated Athens for what it was, strove to make genuine connections, and let God take care of the rest.

Let us pray: God, you are mostly unknown to us, but we know enough because we know that you are love. Help us to keep our nerve and not be intimidated. Help us to see where we can strengthen the places where people connect. May we be smart and skillful, but not worried about our success or failure, because you are with us in good work. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/us/arkansas-pastor-evangelical-churches.html>

And also this: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/05/06/after-years-loud-debate-conservatives-quietly-split-united-methodist-church/?inf\\_contact\\_key=8ae698c288caf1a86047bbcb71762572b7af0999dac2af6212784c39e05d2aef](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/05/06/after-years-loud-debate-conservatives-quietly-split-united-methodist-church/?inf_contact_key=8ae698c288caf1a86047bbcb71762572b7af0999dac2af6212784c39e05d2aef)