

Questions of Faith: Does God Love the People Who Say They Don't Love God?

Acts 17:16-34

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte NC

Rev. Pen Peery

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Today's question – in our Questions of Faith series – is “Does God love the people who say they don't love God.” We've joked this summer a couple of times, saying that to some of the questions the answer is simply “yes” or “no.”

Is Jesus Christ the only way? Yes.

Do we worship more than one God? No.

The answer to today's question – and I am not joking – is yes. Yes – God loves the people who say they don't love God. Can you imagine what it would be like if God only loved us if we loved him first?

God's love is not conditional.

God's love is not something we deserve, or to which we are entitled, or can – somehow – earn.

Read back through this book and you will find that in every instance...*every instance*...God loves the people you will meet on these pages in spite of the ways they behave or believe towards God.

So the answer to the question for today is yes. Period.

But I have a hunch that there is another question that lurks just beneath the surface of whether or not God loves the people who say they do not love him. I have a hunch that what people really want to know is what church is supposed to do with an increasing numbers of people who say they don't love God, or don't believe in God, or who just don't care.

And that is a tough question.

You may have heard the latest statistics from the Pew Research Center. If you haven't heard these statistics, I can bet you have felt them.

The fastest growing category (at 14%) among religious affiliation is “none.” N-O-N-E. As in, “nothing in particular.” Not belief, not disbelief (atheism is actually a very small percentage – only 1.6%) – just, meh. None.

More disturbing, one in four Americans between ages 18-29 describe themselves as “nones” – and whereas in previous generations we might write this off as something common for young adults (thinking that “they'll be back after they get married and have kids...”) the statistics say that this is less and less the case.

As we think about what the church's role is in this new reality, the scripture that speaks a word to us today is from the book of Acts. I will venture a guess that some of you may not have heard this before, but it reads like as an account of history. So listen up! And let us prepare ourselves to hear a word from the Lord. I am reading from the 17th chapter of Acts – which recounts a visit that the Apostle Paul makes to Athens while on his missionary journey to spread the good news of the gospel...

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While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbling want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For 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. The 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, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From 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, so 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. For "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."

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

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers...

450 years before Paul gave his testimony in Athens, another famous person was put on trial there by the intellectual elite of the city. In the year 399 BCE the philosopher Socrates was tried in the People's Court

Socrates was brought up and tried on two different charges. First, he was charged with corrupting the youth. Second, he was charged with impiety. On the second charge, catch this, Socrates was said to have “failed to acknowledged the gods that the city worshipped.” Also, he was charged with “introducing new deities.”

At his trial Socrates offered compelling, public testimony in his defense. However, in the end, the sentence for his crimes was capital punishment. He was forced to drink hemlock.

450 years later, when the apostle Paul came to Athens, he, like Socrates, was struck by the false gods enshrined around the city. As we just heard in Acts, Paul, too, was summoned by the intellectual elite - those who “would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” That group called upon Paul to give testimony at the Areopagus (better known to us, perhaps, as Mars Hill) - a location that was often used for tribunals.

In his testimony, Paul failed to acknowledge his allegiance to the gods of the city. Like Socrates, he too spoke of “new deities” claiming that the God of Israel was the “unknown God” whose altar Paul had seen.

It is true that the Athenians probably cared a lot less about Paul than they did Socrates. Maybe that is why they didn’t react as strongly to him (being called a “babbling” is much better than being forced to drink hemlock). It is also true that Athens was a shadow of itself in Paul’s time as opposed to Socrates’ time.

But obviously, the writer of Acts recounts this story about Paul - the early church’s greatest evangelist - in a way that is intended to remind us of what happened in an Athenian court room a few centuries before. Socrates might not be in the Bible, but a reference to his trial certainly is. Knowing this history, the question becomes: what does the writer of this scripture want us to notice?

Here are two of my guesses:

First - I think the writer of Acts wants us to recognize the courage that it took for Paul to stand up and say what he believed. Being honest is not always popular. Speaking your mind doesn’t always win you friends. Let’s not forget that being a Christian in Paul’s time meant that you were in the smallest of minorities. It didn’t matter if you were in Athens, Rome, Corinth, or Jerusalem - the message of Jesus’ resurrection was a foreign concept at best and grounds for execution at worst.

But that is not all the writer of this story wants us to notice about Paul. I think it is also important to recognize the skill that Paul had as communicator. To be sure, he is uncompromising in the message of the gospel. But Paul did something in his trial before the Athenians that Socrates did not do. Paul took care to understand what motivated the people he addressed. Because, you see, Paul knew that you don’t spread the good news without reading the culture. And interacting with the culture. And appreciating what deep-seeded human needs are expressed by the culture.

Standing up in front of the intellectual elite, Paul's first words were not self-righteous. They were not judgmental. They were complimentary.

"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way..."

As he built his argument, Paul didn't use insider language and theological-speak. He quoted the Athenians the language of their own poets, "For 'in him we live and move and have our being...' " I bet you thought that was from Scripture. I did too until about four days ago! It is not. It was written by Epi-meni-des in 600 BCE.

Paul saw all of the false idols around the city, but instead of only feeling judgment and disdain, he took the time to recognize what motivated the people of Athens to create so many gods in the first place: it was their search for truth. Using that knowledge, Paul tried to persuade his listeners that the 'Unknown God' was the source of all that they sought; of their hearts' desire.

When he finished his testimony the reaction of the crowd was mixed. Some scoffed. A few believed. And some remained curious, saying "we will hear you again about this."

In a culture that did not take him seriously, Paul was a great leader of the church because he took the culture seriously enough to find a place for the gospel to be proclaimed and heard.

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History is repeating itself. As a church, we find ourselves in a time when the culture takes the message of the gospel less and less seriously. Remember when all the stores had the same operating hours as Chic-Fil-A? Remember when it was unheard of to have soccer or baseball games on Sunday? Remember when people like Bill Mahr would be publically shunned instead of enthusiastically embraced? It's a different day.

With this new landscape – where the church can no longer assume that the culture is familiar with our message – we have a few options. We could ignore the culture – disengage – circle the wagons – focus just on ourselves. We could preach against the culture – point out all the things that are wrong – concentrate our efforts on drawing a bright line between what is holy and what is not. Or, we could take the culture seriously. We could interact with it. We could listen for what kind of human need is being expressed by the culture. And we can do that because, after all, we have our feet in both worlds – the church and the culture. It's not us vs. them. It is *us*.

Like Athens, ours is a culture with many enshrined gods. There is the god of materialism. The god of consumerism. The god of progressivism. The god of militarism. The god hedonism.

It is easy to be dismissive of a culture whose values we know are misplaced. But when we can take the time to probe deeply, there are a lot of places in our culture where we can discover genuine human need. And there is one area that is most obvious. It is our culture's need for connection. A need that reveals a very real sense of isolation and a desperate yearning for relationships.

Listen to these statistics:

- World-wide, Facebook has 1.28 billion users.
- Twitter has 271 million.
- Instagram – 200 million
- LinkedIn has 100 million.

We miss the point if we think this cultural phenomenon is about people wasting their time with trivial matters like updating their status to let their friends know what they ate for lunch. It is more significant than that.

What can the church learn from the culture? How can we respond in a faithful way to over a billion people who crave connection?

Could it be that in a world such as ours, the gospel might come alive if the church was focused more on creating lasting, meaningful relationships and less on proving facts and defending the truth?

Could it be that the church – as one of the last places in our culture that offers genuine, inter-generational, community is already set-up to speak the good news to people who are desperate to hear it?

And, importantly, would it compromise the message of the gospel if our focus was on relationships instead of ideology?

I suggest not. Because the gospel that I know is that relationship is the point. God desires to be in relationship with us and the world. In fact, God desires it so much that he sent his son to be Emmanuel – to live, and die, and be raised in order that Christ might reconcile the world to himself.

How can the church love the people who say they don't love God? Perhaps by taking them seriously – and then loving them into the love of God.

Sure, some might scoff at this kind of message.

But others would believe.

And my guess is that many others would say “we will hear you again about this,” and then wait to see if the church actually practices what it preaches...

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