

WORSHIP

Sermon | 5.27.2018



Speaking in Tongues

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Acts 17:16-28

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 babbler 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.”

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Since Easter we have been spending Sunday mornings in the book of Acts. Our goal in this series of sermons has been to learn from Jesus’ earliest disciples – the ones who the Holy



Spirit used to help form a church – to learn from them about what it looks like to really trust that resurrection is real, that Jesus is Lord, even in the midst of a world that is often confusing, if not scary.

Today is the final sermon in the series. Our Scripture tells the story of the apostle Paul – you may remember that the second half of the book of Acts tracks Paul’s missionary journeys. Paul’s mission is to take the Good News of the gospel on the road. When we pick up the story, Paul has been on the circuit for a while. At this point, his travelling companions and fellow evangelists were Silas and Timothy. The plan was to meet in Athens – and Paul was a few days ahead of his friends.

Let’s listen for a word from God.

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It’s one thing to preach to people who show up for worship.

By and large, that had been Paul’s strategy for most of his missionary journey – when he would get to a new town, he would head to the synagogue and make his case about the good news of Jesus to people who already believed in God and were familiar with the Scriptures that Paul would use to make his arguments.

When he got to Athens, that’s where Paul started: the synagogue.

But because he had a few days to kill while he waited on Silas and Timothy to catch up, Paul decided to venture out into the city – into the marketplace – to see what he could see. And what he saw troubled him – and it surprised him. You see, preachers don’t get out much.

46 Sundays out of the year, you’ll find me here, in our sanctuary.

But six Sundays a year – I’m not here.

Some of those six I am actually preaching in other pulpits.

Another couple I am at the beach – holed up with my family and some books. Sometimes I might be somewhere where I like to find a good church, with good worship, where I can just sit in the pew, check the visitor box on the friendship pad, and enjoy time to connect with God without being in charge.

But on a *rare* occasion – I have found myself off on a Sunday and I’m somewhere where I just decide to grab brunch, or take a walk, or visit a museum – and every time I do that I have to tell you, there are A LOT of people who are having a big time on Sunday mornings and that time doesn’t include pews, hymns, prayers, anthems, and listening to one person talk 15 minutes longer than your average attention-span would suggest advisable.



And in those rare moments, I feel like I might have a sense of what Paul experienced when he walked out of the synagogue and into the marketplace in Athens.

In their most recent poll, the Pew Forum reports that among those who identify as mainline protestants, 33% of us attend worship almost weekly, 43% attend once or twice a month or a few times a year (a category that gives quite a bit of room for interpretation), close to 24% seldom or never attend worship, and a little less than 1% “don’t know” – which I am guessing means even less seldom than never. 10 years ago, those numbers at the top (every week and once or twice a month) were each 10 points higher.

Keep in mind, those percentages are among people who say that they’re in; they’re members; they’re religious.

Here at First Presbyterian, we pretty much track those results.

Granted, the Sunday before Memorial Day might not be the best indicator of a normal week, but we’re usually right close to a third of our actual membership on a Sunday morning.

It’s not a great statistic. And a lot of research and ink have gone into understanding why. There are libraries of books and whole categories on Amazon to break down the reasons and offer solutions. They say it is leadership, worship style, little league baseball, options to view church online, Baby Boomers who got out of the habits of their younger years, Millennials who are suspicious of things that feel institutional, the rise of secularism, increased talk about issues in the church, (and, the corollary) churches that stay relatively silent on real-world issues.

All of those things probably do make a difference and are probably affecting how often people walk through these doors on Sunday mornings – and we should pay attention to that, as we are. But it’s also true that there’s not a program, or a worship service, or a leader, or an initiative that is going to bend that curve. Because it’s bigger than that.

I want to be clear – this is not a sermon meant to be a harangue against those who are not sitting here in the pews. I also want to make clear – lest I sound high and mighty from this pulpit – that if I had a job that didn’t ask me to be in the pulpit, then I don’t know if I would be in worship at least 46 Sundays a year.

What I am interested in this morning is us noticing how Paul responded when he walked out of the synagogue and into the marketplace in Athens.

Paul noticed that the city was full of idols. Now, that’s a word that sounds out-of-date. We don’t talk about idols much anymore. As a friend of mine said, an idol “is a word from another time, like using a cassette tape, or navigating your way on a paper map, or giving your child the name Barthalamew. Nobody does that anymore.”



But if we look closer, what Paul noticed about Athens is that it was a city where the people were curious to find out more about their purpose. They were always interested in learning about something new. In something that might help them make sense out of their lives – to help them see what, if any, purpose there was for their living.

An ancient historian once said of Athens: "It is easier to find a god there, than a man." Everywhere Paul looked, there were altars, shrines, and temples. There was one to Athena, one to Zeus, one to Ares, Mars, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Neptune, Diana. Athens was a forest of idols, which tell us that they were searching for something. The fact that there were so many different idols also suggests that they hadn't found it.

When Paul walked out into the marketplace in Athens, he bumped into a city full of people who were trying to make meaning of their lives through their work, their conversation, and their curiosity...they just weren't doing that in the synagogue.

And that sounds pretty contemporary to me. Because I don't think the people who aren't in worship somewhere on Sunday morning have turned their back on God or are disinterested in finding out their purpose. They just might be looking for it somewhere else.

What I think we can learn from Paul is how he responded when faced with this reality. Instead of retreating or wringing his hands or condemning those who were looking for meaning outside of the synagogue, he took to the streets to learn, and to listen, and to engage.

Some of the people he met were the philosophers – the thought leaders of the day. They were a skeptical bunch, but they took Paul to their sanctuary – the Areopagus...or Mars Hill, as it was known, to hear him out. But instead of preaching a fire and brimstone sermon that chastised the people of Athens for worshipping the wrong God, Paul's first words to the crowd 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 church-speak. He quoted the Athenians the language of their own poets, "For 'in him we live and move and have our being...'" I know that's in the Bible, but it's not from the Bible. It is from a poem written by Epi-meni-des in 600 BCE.

Paul saw all of the 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 brought to their attention that within all the other idols he has seen around the city, there was one that, interestingly, didn't have a name. It was an altar with a plaque that was dedicated to "an



unknown god.” Paul invited his listeners to consider that the ‘Unknown God’ was the source of all that they sought; of their hearts’ desire.

What I notice is that rather than telling people what they should believe by using the language and categories that he was used to, Paul communicated the good news of the gospel through language and categories that were familiar to the people who were searching.

And instead of shaming them about investing their time and their worship in the wrong things, he acknowledged that while those other idols might help people make sense of their lives, might help them feel secure – there was still something missing – still a God-shaped hole that could not be filled by anyone other than the God who was unknown to them, but who Paul knew in Jesus Christ.

A few months ago I gave a group of men from our church some homework. The group is one that has started meeting offsite, at a brewery on the second Tuesday of the month. *Bible and Beverage*, we call it. All men are invited – we are taking a break for the summer, but kicking things off again in August.

That night, a few months ago, we talked about the people who don’t show up in any sanctuary. I talked about today’s passage of Scripture. And the homework was to find someone – a friend, a colleague at work, a family member – who was not particularly religious, and ask them what they thought about faith and church.

A number of the guys completed their homework, and what I heard back was pretty consistent. Many of those interviewed talked about the difficulty they had in taking the step to ascribing to a set of beliefs. It wasn’t they didn’t believe in God or in Christ – but they just weren’t sure enough about all the specifics to take the plunge. They associated church with a system of belief...and that didn’t really light their fire.

But most of those interviewed also talked about wanting to belong to something bigger than themselves. To find connection within a community of people who weren’t only together for the purpose of the bottom line. To do something for the common good. To make progress on problems that face our city. To grow in their understanding of mystery.

I think, today, I have a secondary homework assignment for that group of guys. And I will extend that assignment to all of you...

Keep engaging the people who aren’t here...including the ones who are here only once in a while...and when you hear them talk about wanting to be connected, to make a difference, to explore, to work for the common good, to be known for something more than what they produce...when you hear people talking about that unknown god...complement them on their search...and tell them that you know who that is.



Invite them to worship.

And remind them, if they don't know, that worshipping God is not about getting all of our facts straight and our beliefs in order.

But that faith – and life – are about knowing that we belong.

And that the one to whom we belong has and will set things right.

Amen.

