

September 24 – Called to Love

Second Missionary Journey Part 2

Scripture Acts 17: 22-31

Last week we left Paul on his second missionary journey ready to leave the town of Philippi where he had been humiliated, beaten and imprisoned. Instead of turning towards home they push on towards the west, about a week's journey, to the town of Thessalonica. It is likely that they arrived with wounds still healing from the beating they had received.

Soon after arriving again there was an uproar. The new believers feared for the lives of the apostles and so in the middle of the night they helped them to escape. They traveled on to Beroea where the people received the Good News with gladness. Within a few weeks to a month some of the Jewish leaders from Thessalonica arrived to stir up problems for the apostles. Paul leaves Silas and Timothy in Beroea while he travels to Athens about 210 miles to the south. At this time Athens was not a big city with a population of perhaps 20,000, small in comparison to cities like Ephesus and Corinth. But it was still Athens and it stood for Greek culture and philosophy. As Paul entered the agora, or public square, he would have found temples, a synagogue, several sizable markets, civic buildings, and large open spaces in which people gathered for public discourse.

After sharing the Good News in the synagogue, Paul goes out into the public square to offer Christ to the people of Athens. Luke tells us that a group of philosophers began to argue with Paul. They asked Paul to explain his beliefs. Here we have a chance to see the rhetorical and oratorical skills Paul had learned as a young man in Tarsus. The way he talked to these people give us tools we can use as well when sharing our faith.

Paul began with an affirmation

When we are talking to people who believe differently from us, whether that be in the realm of faith or politics we tend to “hunker down” behind our values and prepare for

a fight. Paul, who had already faced severe abuse for the gospel and had every reason to be wary, instead begins with a compliment. He sees all the temples around him. Even though he believed it was wrong to worship this way he says, "I see you are religious in every way." He understood that an attack on their religion or faith practices would end any discussion. What Paul wanted to do was not create faith in them but to move them from the faith they had to faith in Jesus. We need to remember that everyone we meet has hopes, fears, dreams and expectations just like us. They want us to acknowledge this in some form. If all we do is attack, they quit listening.

I am sure you have experienced this. I have gone to the door to find people wishing to share with me about their church. When I mention that I am a minister some of them acknowledge this but most just move forward with their prepared remarks. They talk as if I am a person of no faith or hold wrong beliefs. It immediately leaves a bad taste in my mouth. But, if I have a positive response from them I am more likely to listen. It won't change my mind but at least I am not offended. So always start difficult conversations in the positive.

Paul went on to find a point of connection

With the Athenians, he points to an altar with the inscription: "To an Unknown God." See, they were so religious they created an altar to whatever god they might have missed! They didn't want to offend. Paul says, this unknown God I now proclaim to you! That would get their attention. He starts from a shared place. He goes on to talk a little about the beliefs of the Jews and Christians that would be acceptable to the Greeks as well. He proclaims God is the maker of all things and, as such, does not live in temples made by human hands. He goes on to note that the entire human race derives its existence from God, and that God "gives life, breath, and everything else to us." Neither of these assertions would have been rejected. What he said was consistent with similar conceptions of God held by them. He then goes on to share a couple of brief quotes from Greek poets. At this point he had made a connection. His training in Tarsus in the Greek language, culture, debate and philosophy was critical here.

How often, when we know we disagree with someone, do we seek those points of connection? Too often, as I have said, we are more concerned with defining and defending our position. We feel that any acknowledgement of their views as having validity will weaken our position. We see this played out in the political sphere all of the time. Paul realizes that if you want to make an impact on people you need to get in their space. That was why, when I was in college ministry settings, I tried to stay up to date with music and issues relevant to the college students so I had a frame of reference for chatting with them. Here, on the other hand, I have learned much about resources for the elderly. I do this because I want to be able to talk in ways that have meaning. If all we can do is challenge and object then there is no basis for communication.

Then a gentle critique

Only after this does Paul give a gentle critique about how God doesn't need images of gold or silver. Worshipping such gods in the past was a mistake they made that Paul said God would overlook. God is patient and merciful. He wanted them to see the error in their beliefs but in such a way that they did not feel condemned or rejected. But, he also said that this mercy and forgiveness had its limits.

Too often, we feel the need to point out everything another is doing that is wrong. We make it seem as if they are stupid to believe that way. Paul reminds us that we need to help them find a path forward.

Finally a challenge to believe

Only at the end does he proclaim Jesus, risen from the dead. The central fact of our faith was not what he started with but how he ended his speech. He realized that we need to find common ground with people before they will listen to us.

Most of the people rejected him. A few became believers including a woman named Damaris, who is celebrated as a saint in the Orthodox Church. Even though few initially believed, we do not know what seeds these words of Paul planted in the hearts of people there. Ultimately, Athens became one of the major faith centers of the early church.

Paul then traveled on to Corinth where he might have stayed as long as 18 months. During that time he started a church that would soon be one of the most important in the early days of our faith. It was in a large city with a huge temple to the god Apollo and another one to the goddess of love Aphrodite. Ritual prostitution was part of her worship. Sexual immorality was rampant in this town. Over half the town were slaves. The divide between the wealthy and the poor was amongst the greatest of any of the large cities in the Roman world. Paul struggled with this church. After leaving he ends up writing at least four letters to them dealing with everything from sexual immorality, to the nature of true love, the meaning of the resurrection, to how all are to be treated equally.

Following his time in Corinth he boards a ship and after a brief time in Ephesus journeys on to Jerusalem. Paul's second missionary journey has been long and difficult. But, in that time he entered Europe and set loose our faith on this continent. Who would have guessed that these tentative steps would eventually lead to our faith overtaking the Roman world?

Today, I want to leave us with the thought of how love should dominate all of our actions. This is particularly true when we are dealing with people who are different from us or disagree with us. We have been shown and taught what Paul called the more excellent way of love. This means we need to find common ground, see them in the best possible light, offer forgiveness and, when challenging their actions, do it only after first finding those places of common identity. It is difficult to do, but God is greater than our fears and troubles.