

Meeting People Where They Are

Easter 6; Series A

Acts 17:16-31

“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.”

Acts 17:17

A sanctuary full of worshippers, around eighty men among them, about to find out the future location where they and their families are going to live and work for an indefinite period of time. Sounds pretty mysterious? Sounds nerve-racking? That was mine and Talitha’s experience in the beginning of May, 2011 on what is termed “Call Day” at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO. Every year the men who have received Seminary theological training and are certified for the Pastoral Ministry by the faculty find out which congregation has Called them to be their Pastor. Of course the rest of the family, if applicable, is invited to come along as well. In most cases, prior to that Call Day service, the candidates for the Pastoral Ministry have no idea where they will be going to serve. So, yes, the whole experience is a little mysterious and nerve-racking.

Reflecting on my experience, I recall hearing my name called, hearing the congregation that I will be serving, Atonement Lutheran Church, hearing the city and state, Spring Valley, CA, and thinking, “Cool, but where is that?” The placement director did give me and the whole congregation a hint before naming my assignment when he said, “This guy will be looking to sell his snow blower.”

It was quite a special, memorable night for me and Talitha, for our immediate families, as well as for my classmates and their families. I remember at least three memorable pieces of advice that were given to me by three seasoned Pastors. These pieces of advice have truly helped to shape my Ministry as your Pastor. The first was given to me by the Placement Director, “Remember that you will be serving in a team Ministry setting, with a team of laypeople.” The second was given to me by my former Senior Pastor at Our Savior Lutheran in Lansing, MI. He said, “Look for gifts and encourage people to serve in a way that makes use of their unique gifts.” The third piece of advice was given to me by the President of the Seminary. Immediately after hearing of my Placement, I walked up front, received my Call documents and then proceeded to receive congratulatory hand-shakes from a number of officials that were part of the Call process. When I shook the hand of the President of the Seminary, he said these words to me, *“Love the people where they are but love them enough not to leave them there. Lead them!”* In other words, *“Serve people with the Gospel by meeting them where they are.”*

I would like to spend some time reflecting on this piece of advice for our purposes this morning. We saw it exemplified by the Apostle Paul in our first reading from the Book of Acts. Paul continues his work of bringing the good news of the Gospel to the people throughout the ancient world. In our reading Paul travels into the ancient city of Athens, armed with the truth of the Gospel. He looks around and sees a problem. The people were fearing, loving, and trusting in the wrong gods to provide, protect, and preserve them. We heard the problem in the first verse of our reading, “The city was full of idols” (vs.16). With a sense of urgency Paul sets out to give people the good news of salvation from the one,

true God who stands above and is superior to all manmade idols. He spreads this news by interacting with their cultural ways of knowing, their religious systems. In this way he meets the people where they are. He also literally meets the people where they are by going to the places where they gather, the synagogue, the marketplaces, even the city's courthouse of sorts, the Areopagus, where judicial cases were often heard and debated. Through the Apostle Paul, God is meeting people where they are so that the people can meet Jesus.

So where were you when God met you and joined you to his plan of salvation in Christ? What or who were you fearing, loving, and trusting in above all else to provide, protect, and preserve you? Some of you were infants and your parents brought you to a baptismal font where God spoke through one of his Pastors and put his powerful words on you through the water, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Maybe you remember God meeting you in a way similar to how he met Timothy, a fellow servant of St. Paul. Through his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice, God worked to meet Timothy in his Word and through the waters of Baptism. God met others of you a little later in life. Maybe, like me, you can remember your baptism because it happened when you were much older. Maybe there was a particular moment when you remember a pastor preaching a sermon that met you where you were. Maybe a story was told or an analogy was used that connected God's unchanging story of salvation to your changing life and circumstances, and the ever changing culture in which you live.

As Christians in this time and this place, in twenty-first century America, we are tied together with the Apostle Paul and the first Christians in this one incredible way. We are baptized and have faith in the one true God who has come down from heaven to meet us where we are. That means that even at the end of May, on Memorial Day weekend, we can have a little Christmas celebration. Together with Martin Luther through his Christmas hymn, "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come," we remember that we are joined to the salvation plans of our God who first left his heavenly home to visit us through his incarnation and birth. He ministered for three years, ushering in the Kingdom of God and its message. He met our worst enemies, our Sin and guilt on a cross, piling it upon himself, through suffering and death as the royal heavenly king, forgiving an entire world of treason of the worst kind. He rose from the dead to establish an eternal kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth. He rose to establish it for all who receive his forgiveness. He rose to establish it for all who are marked as his loyal citizens through the water and the word and for those who continue faithfully to hear and obey his Word, and receive the royal feast of his bodily presence in bread and wine for forgiveness and the strengthening of faith. Together with Paul, the first Christians, all of our friends and family who have died as baptized, believing Christians, the whole communion of saints, we are joined to the one true God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who has met us exactly where we are.

Now we go. The Apostle Paul knew the message of salvation well. He knew God's Word well. This allowed him to interact with the philosophies of the day. This allowed him to interact with the polytheistic religious system of his day. This allowed him to use the things of the culture to preach Christ. We, like Paul, meet people where they are through our vocations, right where we are. We love them enough not to leave them there. We listen to their life organizing stories. We listen to whom they take their worries, cares, sufferings, and difficulties. We listen to how they deal with the difficult moments in life. That gives us a hint as to the God they are trusting in. Who or what they are trusting in to give them ultimate meaning, and identity, and security in life. As it was Paul's goal, so it should be our goal to meet people where they are in order to lead them to the true God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We find ways of relating the things of their lives and their experiences to God's story of salvation. For, we know the joy he brings. We know the

certainty of his salvation. We know he is trustworthy. We know he will not disappoint. In our vocations and together as a congregation through our strategic plan, let us continue to meet people where they are to love them and care for them, and lead them to the God of our salvation. Amen.