

<Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; John 14:15-21>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

How do you bear witness to the life and good news of Jesus, which we as Christians have to offer to a world that so often feels to be in need of good news, peace, and hope? In need of a reminder of the promise of life we have received and which we steward?

In the 1986 film *The Mission*, Jeremy Irons plays a Spanish Jesuit priest named Gabriel who has journeyed to South America to visit indigenous villages there, and engages this very question which is at the core of our Christian calling and discipleship. As the movie begins, we are led to understand that previous missionaries, with similar purpose, have been...less than successful in this important goal, and now Gabriel is to undertake the task. But his approach to bearing witness to the life of Jesus, to proclaiming good news, to living out the calling of the gospel is, apparently, different than the way in which his predecessors went about their attempts. As we see early in the movie, his attempt makes all the difference: he realized that he was not bringing God in Jesus to the people, but that rather he was helping them to see and recognize God in Jesus already present and waiting for them to know him. And that can be attributed to following in Paul's example as he preached at the Areopagus in Athens, Greece.

A lot has happened in The Book of Acts between last week's reading, when Paul was still Saul, a zealot of the Pharisees who, from the martyrdom of Stephen, began persecuting the early church, the first followers of Jesus after the ascension. Saul has sought out these followers, arrested them with prejudice, and seen many of them thrown in jail if not executed. But then, on the road to Damascus, Saul has a conversion experience, and encounters the risen Christ. From this, he converts to Christianity, and after a time of three years or so of education and training, as well as debate and discussion with Peter and the other apostles, he adopts the new name of Paul and goes out into the world to proclaim and bear witness to the very Jesus whom he previously persecuted with malice.

And now Paul, a missionary out in the world, has arrived to Athens, Greece, and as he awaits the arrival of his traveling companions Silas and Timothy, he wanders the city, taking in the sights.

Athens, at the time, was seen as the center of education, thinking and philosophy, and the pinnacle of academia. This is where all the great philosophers of life and thinking had gathered and debated in years prior, and it is where all learned peoples now gather to continue in their educations. Think of places today like Harvard, or Oxford, and you get the idea. And so here is Paul, in this very educated, very rational and thinking city of renown, wandering the city and taking in the sights. And as he does so, he notices "an altar with the inscription, 'to an unknown god.'" In seeing this, Paul recognizes an opportunity.

It is the same opportunity which is before the character of Gabriel, the Spanish Jesuit. It is the same opportunity which is before us in every encounter we have with others. It is the opportunity every follower of Jesus has had over the past two-thousand years: to proclaim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and to bear witness to the Kingdom of God which breaks into our world, our empires and countries, into our lives. Simply put, it is the opportunity to recognize Jesus already present in any given situation or encounter.

Which brings us back to our initial question: how do we go about this calling? How do we approach this opportunity? And our answer to this can be determined through the larger question of, "where do we see and understand God to be present?"

One of the reasons the previous Jesuit missionaries were unsuccessful in their attempts to share and spread the gospel news of Jesus was their preconceived notion that there was no aspect, no awareness, no presence of God already in place among the people whom they visited. From this perspective, they believed that it was them, and only them, who had anything to offer; certainly there was nothing, in their minds, that the indigenous peoples had to offer them. It was a very one-sided approach, and it ultimately led to failure. Had they remembered Paul's sermon at the Areopagus, however, they might have realized a more faithful outcome.

Paul, likewise, could have carried such an approach into the situation among the Athenians. As one who had directly encountered the risen Jesus and received understanding from Jesus, where he was previously deficient, Paul might have been tempted to apply that same kind of mindset to his sermon, that he had the knowledge that was needed for life and that everyone else did not. But instead, he recognized that, in a general sense, the Athenians were *almost there*, and just needed the right encouragement and instruction, the right way of looking and seeing, to get to that final piece.

He begins his sermon by acknowledging how spiritual they already are, even to the point of attributing worship and acclaim to a random, unknown god. Paul recognizes what is already in place, and then seeks to build upon it and guide it to its fullest conclusion in Christ. Paul recognizes the reality that Christ, even if unnamed and undefined, is indeed present, and that his calling is to proclaim understanding and invite awareness, not to establish something that was previously absent.

This is a work of ongoing curiosity rather than certainty. In the life of faith, we are called upon to trust that God is present and the Spirit of God is leading us, and to then remain open and curious as to where that will lead us, what we will discover, and how we will encounter God in any given time and place.

If Paul had not been open to looking for God, seeking to recognize God in unexpected places, then he never would have known the opportunity to proclaim God in the resurrected Jesus at that time in Athens. If Paul had not been curious in the Spirit of

God, then he would not have recognized potential and future brothers and sisters in faith in the people to whom he spoke, preached, and ministered.

This same approach made it possible for the character Gabriel to successfully engage with the indigenous villages and build relationships with them, and then to proclaim a faith which invited them into deeper relationship with Christ, and the building of the church. This same approach enables us, in our own lives of faith, to proclaim hope and good news. This is not of our own efforts or capabilities, but comes from the in-dwelling of the Spirit of God, promised by Jesus even as he was about to be taken from the disciples ahead of his crucifixion.

In his Farewell Discourse found in John's gospel, Jesus continues to help them - to help us, still - understand the way and the example which he has set for us to follow. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

This work is a work of love - of relationship and of connection - and it enables an approach to proclamation which is based in joining God where God is already present, curiously looking for and open to discovering God's work in any given time and place.

"The life, death, resurrection and ascension of the incarnate person of God was all leading up to this destiny of being given in love, received in love, and having God fully revealed to us as fully as we are able to receive" (Chelsey Harmon, Center for Excellence in Preaching). This is a "here and now" reality, ready to be claimed and lived into, ready to shape us in ministry and relationship in the very minutiae of our daily living.

How will we approach the calling of proclamation, of seeing hope and good news realized and established? Our calling is to remember that God is already present and at work, and wherever we go and whatever we do we join God in that work already begun. In this, we see and recognize Christ in one another, and we love as those who have first been loved. Only in this will we see our efforts faithfully successful. Only in this will we realize the Kingdom of God evident and present for all the world. Only in this will we be Christ's faithful witnesses, for the glory of God. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*