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Acts 17:16-33

Outward Church: A Lost City

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I want us to take some time this morning and think about our communities, the places where we live. I especially want us to think about Westford, the community God has placed us in. As we think about our towns, think of some of the things you really like about your community. What do you appreciate?

I love Westford. It's a beautiful town, with lots of winding roadways, big beautiful houses, land, and yet there's also a nice modern part of town with doctor's offices, Whole Foods, Market Basket, and some great restaurants. I personally like the craft beer shop in Westford, although it's been a while since I've been there.

I also appreciate the good school system in Westford. Westford takes a lot of pride in giving its kids a great education. I've never seen a town-run government. That's pretty interesting. One of the upside-sides of it is anyone can have their voice heard. At the Westford last annual meeting I attended, they were debating budgeting funds for a park, and a teenage boy got up and talked about he hoped there would be a dock for their rowing team. That's really cool that he felt that civically engaged that he could do that. I serve on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee. I appreciate Westford trying to be more mindful of inclusion and being pro-active about addressing racial inequity. Westford has a great library, sports teams.

Westford can kind of seem like it has it all. But what about when those good things become our ultimate things? If we look more closely at a great education, a good education can be a way to prove that you're better than others, smarter than them. A great job can be a way to show you don't need to depend on anyone else or to purchase all the things you really want in life. But a big house won't fill that even bigger hole inside our hearts. A town-run government has lots of benefits, but as many of you know, they can get pretty uncharitable, pretty mean. When good things become ultimate things, that's what we call idolatry.

“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.” Timothy Keller

When a good thing becomes a, I must have it, or I'll feel depressed; that's a sign it's an idol. People are made to worship. God designed us to worship him, but when we don't worship him, we'll find something else to worship, maybe even ourselves. The question for us as a church, and as individuals on our frontlines, is this... Does all the idolatry break your heart? Does it matter to you that our neighbors are worshipping false gods? Does it matter that our coworkers and classmates aren't really living life to its fullest because their focus is on living life to its fullest and not God himself?

It tore the Apostle Paul up inside when he walked through the city of Athens and saw all the idols. It says, “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” The NET Bible says, “his spirit was greatly upset.” It really bothered him when he saw all the idols. It made him angry, frustrated, just like when he encountered the possessed girl back in Acts 16. When we see the idols in our community, how does it make us feel? Does it bother us? Does it vex us?

If I'm honest with myself, no, not really. But I think that says more about my heart and my awareness than anything else. If I really understood the affront my neighbor's worship of idols is to God's glory, and if I really understood how crippling it is to their souls, and if I really understood how lost my neighbors, and community and city are, I think I'd feel more like Paul feels.

We're supposed to care about the lostness of our city. (Acts 17:16)

We're supposed to care about who our neighbor worships. It's been said whatever building in your city is the largest is probably your idol.¹ In New York City, that might be some financial buildings. But did you know some have called Boston and Cambridge the Athens of the United States? Athens was a place of learning and education. Both Harvard and MIT are located in Cambridge. I would be really intimidated to go and lecture at Harvard or Cambridge. The one time I went on a field trip there with the Ockenga Program, I might have asked a question, but I don't even know if I did that.

But Paul, on the other hand, isn't afraid. He wades right in. He goes to a synagogue, tells them about Jesus, then goes to the marketplace and reasons with them. I'm not sure if he tells them about Jesus or just tries to understand them better. It's like he goes to Cambridge, well, first goes to a Jewish synagogue to tell them Jesus is the Messiah. Then, he gets a crate, goes to Harvard Square, sets up right next to the "Out of Town News" stand, right smack dab in the middle of it all, and starts talking about God and truth. That would make me really uncomfortable.

My mentor, Sam Kim, worked in Corporate law for many years in Boston. He became so concerned for the lost of the city that he would use his lunch breaks to walk around the city and tell people about Jesus. People do what Paul did. We can do it too if the lostness of our city breaks our hearts enough. I'm a part of a pastor's group with Sam where we're talking about what it would take for every man, woman, and child to have multiple opportunities to hear about Jesus. For that to happen, every believer in all of our churches would need to be mobilized to be a missionary where they live, learn, work, and play. Something to think about. How can we better mobilize to share about Christ to our lost cities?

Paul is standing on this crate, talking about God and truth, and some Harvard philosophy students come by and begin to engage with him. Here's my next point.

We have to be unafraid to engage because of the Holy Spirit and yet prepared to engage thoughtfully. (Acts 17:17-21)

Paul engaged with the best and brightest in his city. He engaged with the:

1. **Epicureans** – They believed God was so far and so distant you couldn't know him. Your body doesn't live past death, so best to party and have fun because nothing matters in the end. "You only live once." "Do whatever makes you happy." That's Epicurean.
2. **Stoics** – An impersonal force called the "logos" holds all of creation together. God is everything. Everything is god. Pain and pleasure don't matter. Just do what needs to be done. "We all believe in the same God." "Just be a good person."

Those are powerful and compelling philosophies. But Paul wasn't afraid of these people. Paul had a good education. He sat under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the foremost Jewish thinkers of his day. He was clearly a very smart man, very educated, and yet unafraid because he knew the Holy Spirit would take all his learning, and his personality, and his passions and giftings, and bring it all together to share Christ.

There are some really powerful philosophies and ideologies today. Post-modernism argues there is no absolute truth. You have your truth, and I have my truth. We can't be afraid of this. We should research it, try to understand it, learn how to present the truth, and be unafraid to engage. We have the Holy Spirit. He'll guide us and work through us.

This year we're going to attempt to do our Easter Service on the Westford common. I'm really excited. It gives us an opportunity to try and engage our community, to get out there in our public square, and engage.

¹ Another pastor said Timothy Keller said this.

Would you begin to pray about who the Lord might like you to invite to this service? Please pray. But how should we engage?

We can engage by finding common ground and also countering false beliefs. (Acts 17:22-28)

Some Harvard professors hear what Paul is saying, and they invite him to come to give a lecture in one of Harvard's auditoriums. Paul goes for it. He knows what he's in for. Some are really interested in hearing him out, but others probably just want to make a fool of him. But Paul trusts the Holy Spirit. He steps forward in faith, and he buys himself a Harvard sweatshirt.

Now in Paul's day, the Harvard lecture hall was this place called the Areopagus. The Areopagus was called Mar's Hill, and it was this big hill covered in Rocks with the Greek Parthenon in the background. You could look out to the city but also look up the hill to where the people worshipped a 39-foot statue of Athena in the Parthenon. The Areopagus also functioned as a court. This could be dangerous for Paul. In other cities, people have responded with riots, imprisonment, and violence. There's a risk here, but he goes, he engages, and he finds common ground.

Acts 17:22b-23 (ESV)

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

- Paul acknowledges that they're religious, and he is too. They share a commonality. A lawyer friend of mine remarked that some of the lawyers he's met with just want to win the argument. But his approach is to try and find 2-3 commonalities and build a solution from there.
- Paul finds an altar that says, "To the unknown God," and uses that as a starting point. "Hey, I know this God you speak of! Let me tell you about him."

But then, he begins to introduce who this God is. By doing this, he counters some of their false beliefs:

Acts 17:24-25 (ESV)

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

- Remember how the Epicureans believe God is far away and distant? Paul is saying that's not the case at all. Yes, God made us, but he's still ruling as Lord over the heavens and the earth. In fact, he's giving all people their life and energy as we speak. This also contradicts the Stoics, who believed that we are all god. God is distinct from us yet present with us. You're not God, but you can know him.
- Paul also contradicts their false gods, which he calls "objects" in v23. He won't even call them "gods." They're idols, objects, no power to them. Now he's countering their entire religious paradigm, all those beautiful temples they made, and all the false beliefs they contain.

I know one of the things I need to get comfortable doing is countering false beliefs. I tend to just be silent and listen, and there certainly is a time for that, but there's also a time to speak up and share the truth about Christ Jesus.

Lots of the people in Westford I know, especially from my gym, really believe in creating healthy bodies, minds, and spirits. They do it through things like education, fitness, and eating healthy. They love Whole Foods, and they love their gyms and schools. Those things matter, but there's one relationship that's missing,

the one with God. How might we share that? How might we gently remind others that the body and soul really matter and God cares about both?

How about the environment? God doesn't teach a "trash-the-environment" ethic for engaging with creation. The Bible doesn't give us a "use-it-or-lose-it" philosophy. The Bible teaches a holistic ethic that tells us to care for the environment, to be wise with our bodies, and to steward well what God has given us. As Christians, we care about things like global warming because we want to do a good job of tending creation. There is lots of common ground there, yet also room for disagreement. Believing in God actually gives us a really good reason for taking care of our world, especially if he's going to hold us accountable. Since our neighbors care about the environment, when we show we care too, that's a commonality that can lead to conversations about Christ and creation care.

Then Paul quotes two poets, people outside the Bible.

Acts 17:26-28 (ESV)

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually 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 are indeed his offspring.”

Wait a second, isn't Paul doing it wrong? Isn't he supposed to talk about the Ten Commandments and how they've all sinned somehow? And then when these Grecian people are convinced they've sinned, show them that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ? Doesn't Paul believe in the Roman Road to salvation? Of course, he does, but that's not the only way to tell others about Christ. This speech is boiled down to just the big points. We know Paul likes to preach for a long time because he once preached so long Eutychus fell asleep and fell out a window and died. Paul had to raise him back up again (Acts 20:7-12). But if you just look at the summary, Paul doesn't mention Jesus' name. Instead, he takes a different approach, heading towards the resurrection.

Paul has read widely, even some of their poets. Gasp, he's read things outside the Bible, and that's okay! He's read their classics, he understands what they value, and he goes from there. He builds this amazing case that, just like one of their writers said, “In him we live and move and have our being,” so our God created and sustains us. God hasn't abandoned us. He cares about us. Then he quotes one of their poets, “For we are indeed his offspring.” He agrees, “Yes, God did make us.” Paul is finding so much common ground, and he uses it to build a case for the truth of the Christian faith.

The Lord gave me an example in my own life of how the things I know outside the Bible helped me share the message of Jesus with some of my gym mates. I mentioned in our fitness class how my family went away on vacation, and I stayed home to work on my Doctorate of Ministry. That got my coach sharing about how she is learning about prisoners and the prison system in her classes. I told her about the [Netflix Documentary the 13th on the prison system](#), and the book it's based on, *The New Jim Crow*. We talked about the prison system in Norway and how it's much different than the prison system in America. As the conversation progressed, I got to share about how we as a church support a prison ministry. I shared about Dennis and how he's helping people come out of the prison system. Near the end of the conversation, I shared how Jesus, when he began his ministry, opened the great Isaiah scroll and read how he came to set the prisoners free and help those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18-19), how Jesus' mission involved giving hope to those imprisoned. She seemed to resonate with what I was saying.

Afterward, I realized that it was a little like what Paul did. He used something he knew about and used it as a way to tell others about Christ. So the application is, watch that new Netflix Documentary all your coworkers are talking about. Think about how the documentary points to our need for Christ. Does it focus on a need or a problem to which Christ is the solution? They're often about some form of human depravity. Christ can forgive and renew. Or it's a hero narrative about someone who saved the day. How does that person somehow reflect Christ? Watch it, have an educated discussion, and share how Jesus connects. Doesn't that sound like great homework? Go watch Netflix! We can engage by finding common ground and also countering false beliefs.

We also need to be honest about what's at stake. (Acts 17:22-28)

Paul goes someplace I find it really difficult to go, judgment.

Acts 17:29-31a (ESV)

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed;

God has revealed himself through Christ Jesus. That means people don't have an excuse anymore to keep believing that they're god, or that everything is god, or that God can be whatever you want. There's only one true and living God who has revealed himself through Jesus. The only proper response is repentance, to say we're sorry for our sins and sorry for rejecting the Son of God, even unwittingly. But here's the good news.

We get to tell them about the resurrection too. (Acts 17:29-33)

How can we know that all of this is true? Because God raised Jesus from the dead.

Acts 17:31b (ESV)

and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Jesus' resurrection is proof that all Jesus taught is true, even the hard bits. This is tough because we don't have a video of Jesus rising from the grave. It takes faith to believe, but it is true. My Doctorate of Ministry professor asked our group of pastors what it means to share the gospel? He thinks it comes down to sharing the resurrection, that Jesus died and rose again from the grave. Any who repents and believes in him will receive eternal life.

So what was the response to Paul's message and when he told the Epicureans and Stoics about the resurrection? Did you know?

There was actually “a fifth-century BC play by the Athenian dramatist Aeschylus, which would have been well known in Paul's day, the god Apollo inaugurates the court of the Areopagus. And one of the things he says, solemnly and as it were bindingly, is that ‘when a man dies, and his blood is spilled on the ground, there is no resurrection.’ – Acts for Everyone by N.T. Wright

They didn't believe in the resurrection. Mars hill is all about death, but Paul brought it back to life. The dead are raised. That would have shifted the ground under their feet. When we tell others that Jesus rose from the dead, it might shift the ground from underneath their feet too.

Some mocked Paul; some wanted to hear more, and others wanted to believe. Two notable early-church believers joined Paul's movement. When we share and find common ground, whether it's through the Easter service or through our frontline work, we might just be introducing Christ to somehow who believes and becomes an important part of a church community. That gives me a lot of hope.

So do you care about the lostness of your city? God might want to use you, in surprising ways, using the knowledge and experiences you have to share about Christ with others. Let's pray.

Romans 15:13 (ESV)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe your feelings about your city and the people that live in it?
2. What areas of idolatry do you naturally dislike, and which ones might get past you?
3. How does fear shape the way you interact with those around you?
4. What are some "common ground" ways you can relate to your coworkers, friends, family, and city?
5. What would it take for you to tell someone about the judgment?
6. Why does the resurrection matter?

Sources

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