

Don't we all need good news?! More than a decade ago I had the privilege of accompanying two ten year-old boys, one being our son, to Wilderness at the Smokies and the biggest indoor and outdoor water parks in the world (according to their web site). I'll call the other precocious boy Lucas. Lucas asked me on the car ride there, "Ms. Jennifer, are you a priest?" I immediately answered NO- then a slightly muffled YES and then I said- as to completely confuse this kid- I am a pastor, a preacher. The look on his face was utter confusion. At one meal, hungerly and embarrassingly, we plowed into our food without having the blessing (which we had done at previous meals that weekend) and Lucas chimed in, "Aren't we supposed to say the blessing before we eat?" Then he asked me, "Ms. Jennifer, do you talk to people about God?" I said, "Yes, I do." He then followed up at dinner time asking if we could talk about God, and we did for a while. At the arcade, tickets in hand at the prize booth, Lucas chose a necklace with a cross as his prize. He said, "This is the cross that represents Jesus. Didn't Jesus die on it?" I was blown away and convicted at the same time. This kid was trying to squeeze the good news out of me! I soon learned that Lucas and his family didn't go to church. They didn't hold any religious beliefs. Lucas was hungry to talk about the God he had heard about in Jesus Christ, yet it took several attempts on his part to get me, a professional good news share-er, to share with him. I learned an important lesson that weekend. People are searching for God, and God is at work- even on our vacation.

Growing up in South Carolina, it seemed everyone belonged to a church, whether you went to church or not. If your grandmother was associated with a church, it's where you "went" to church. Therefore, I didn't talk much about Jesus or my faith. I naively and wrongfully assumed that most everyone believed in God. After moving from Greenville at nine years old, we moved to Great Falls, SC, about 40 minutes away from PTL (Praise The Lord ministries) with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. I never went there but I visited a church with a friend whose dad worked there. I didn't know that I was attending a Baptist revival where the preacher preached so long that he had white stuff coming out of his mouth and he seemed angry. I was confused because my dad didn't preach that way. In college I began collecting tracts left on my windshield or in my mailbox. My favorite one? "Ten Reasons You're Going to Hell." Suffice it to say, I've had my own deconstructing and reconstructing journey when it comes to reclaiming the word, "evangelism." I resonate with two definitions for evangelism. 1. "One beggar trying to tell another beggar where to find bread" (D.T. Niles). 2. "joyfully sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world" (PC(USA)) definition). These definitions don't say anything about cramming Jesus down anyone's throat (figuratively speaking, of course). Again, until I began looking at evangelism through a different lens, the only approach I knew was one that felt completely cheesy and fake. Even with those who try to hijack evangelism today, making it political, I still call myself an "evangelical"- one who joyfully shares the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. And I hope that many of you can claim or will reclaim what it means to be evangelicals or witnesses to this good news.

Because the world desperately needs to know of the saving hope and new life we have in Jesus Christ and even more- perhaps a different version than others!

In today's story in the book of Acts, Paul is evangelizing to a very different crowd using a different version. This is a crowd of academic elites and philosophers- gentiles. These were thinkers who soak up new ideas like a sponge and then play with those ideas like a cat plays with a toy- batting them back and forth, tossing them to a colleague and then back to dissect them. Only twice in Acts is Paul's missionary preaching aimed at only Gentiles- here and in Ch. 14 (vv. 15-17) at Lystra. It is interesting where Paul is speaking in today's text. He's in Athens, the intellectual and cultural center of Greece. This isn't a planned missionary excursion for Paul. We're told in the verses before this that while waiting for his colleagues, Silas and Timothy, Paul is distressed to see Athens so full of idols that he argues in the synagogue with the Jews and in the marketplace with those who happened to be there (vv. 16-17). He is overheard by some philosophers who take him to Areopagus, where we find him today. Areopagus was both a place- a small rocky hill where the city court met- and it was the most prestigious and venerable council of elders in this history of Athens- so named because they met on that site. It's almost as if Paul is on trial here. In the verses before our reading today, Paul has been asked a question by this group of philosophers. "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 (vv. 19b-20). And Paul begins to preach words that do not allow for a faith that is disconnected from mind, soul or body.

Paul's sermon could be viewed as a master class in an Evangelism 101. He knows that he needs to identify what is missing in the religious worldview of the gathered elite. There are many ways that Paul could've gone about this. He could have berated those gathered about their false gods and how they're cut off from salvation (the hellfire & damnation approach). Or he could have completely slammed art as a way to experience God. But Paul knew that many of them, if not all of them, were skeptics. In this crowd, Paul would've wasted his time by starting with scripture, and he respects his audience enough to avoid talking down to them. So he uses the altar to the unknown god as his **way in**. He doesn't force a way in or make a way in, as so often others have done (the in-your-face approach). He sees an opportunity to make a connection and share about God. And he does it in a way that piques their interest and curiosity, not insults their intellect and thus closes their ears. Greenville native and former Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon, suggests that "the church, rather than standing back from pagan religiosity, pointing our fingers in righteous indignation, should, like Paul in Athens, minister to their searching" (*Acts, Interpretation Series*).

Maybe this is the first time that they're hearing the gospel? Paul is **determined** and **adaptive** in his proclaiming the gospel. What will it take for us, like Paul, to adapt to the culture around us in order to

faithfully communicate the good news?” (John McClure, *FOW*). If we take our cue from Paul, **we first listen to and observe the culture around us**. Paul has picked up some philosophical vocabulary along the way and goes on to quote from two of their poets in his sermon. He uses their own language to share who God is. Think about it. Some folks get upset when a secular song is used in a Bible study, yet what if the lyrics of that song speak to who God is for someone? What if God can use even a secular song to bring people to faith? Paul makes a good assumption that people are searching for the one true God. Paul not only saw the many idols but the words inscribed on them. He **looks for openings or opportunities to share the gospel** of Jesus Christ. Even though he is distressed about the idols, Paul chooses an alternative path to deliver the good news.

Paul isn't offering a watered-down version of the gospel. Yet, some folks argue that because Paul doesn't quote scripture or mention Jesus by name that he wasn't firm in sharing his beliefs. I completely disagree. Paul is faithful. He just does it in a different way. He meets them where they are, and his witness is on point. Notice that the message does NOT have to put others down or diminish their practices to still be persuasive. “In quoting the Greek poet Aratus, “we are his offspring,” Acts’ Paul demonstrates that all humans are part of God’s progeny, which provides a glimpse for us into what divinity looks like. Divinity does NOT look like gold, silver, or stone. Divinity looks like people. Missing God’s closeness and God’s resemblance to humanity is the foundation of ignorance. This type of ignorance is different from the

ignorance connected to the unknowability of God. This type of ignorance is linked to not recognizing other humans as family members” (Jeremy L. Williams, *WP*). This is the crux of Paul’s argument. “If we are God’s offspring, living, moving, and being in God, how can we imagine that God is like a precious metal or stone” (Margaret Aymer, *WP*). God is a relational God in Jesus Christ. His message is crystal clear. He invites those gathered to know the Creator God through the resurrected Christ. He invites them into repentance. Paul doesn’t let those gathered off the hook. He was faithful, even when the resurrection was considered taboo-crazy talk/blasphemous. Yes, some scoffed while others said they wanted to talk more and others became believers. What we say is not always in agreement with the culture nor always popular, yet we’re called to trust God’s Spirit at work in the world. And this can also be uncomfortable, especially when we confuse the judgment piece. We aren’t the ones judging. God is. We aren’t the ones who get to say who’s in and who’s out- who believes and who doesn’t. God does. We do the sharing from our own experiences and approaches and then leave the rest up to God. As humans, we often forget that God is the initiator in our lives. God makes the first move toward us, creating us, opening our hearts and minds and equipping us. God places people where God wants them, when God wants them. We never know who among us is searching for God.

When someone says, “I don’t believe in God.” We can say, “Then tell me what/who you do believe in!” Sometimes after listening to them, I often say, “Well, I don’t believe in THAT kind of God, either!” We are all called

to proclaim the good news of Jesus' saving love for the world. And we do it each in our own way. Maybe you say you hesitate to share because like me, you don't want to overwhelm someone or you feel too ignorant or stupid or unprepared or don't want to offend or maybe you don't know what you believe yourself? How do you create space to look for the "altars to the unknown god" in your life?

In the book of Acts there are NO two gospel proclamations that are exactly the same. That's because no two cultures are the same. Yes, we have the same gospel message, but it must be communicated in different ways. Evangelism is not just you saying the same script over and over again. The gospel has to be proclaimed into the customs and cultural register of where the church is being sent. Paul was a bold yet respectful disciple in his evangelical approach. He was confident that even in an unplanned stop, even when his sermons weren't always successful in bringing people to faith, the gospel was proclaimed as faithfully and creatively as he could tell it. And tell it he did. Like Paul said, in God we live and move and have our being. We're God's offspring. God made us so that we would search for God! So then let us repent and be truthful about where we are on our own faith journeys. We don't have to have all the answers or our lives put together before we can proclaim who God in Christ is. It may not be an altar to an unknown god, but let's look for authentic opportunities to invite others to experience the Resurrected Lord. This is Evangelism 101 and we're now certified to go and joyfully proclaim Christ to the world, as uncomfortable as we may be! For we've got some good news to share! Thanks be to God! Amen.