

## A POSTURE OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Queen Anne Christian Church  
Rev. Marvin Eckfeldt, preaching  
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Acts 17:22-31

It is interesting what you can discover when you take a detour! Paul finds himself in Athens in our text because he took a detour. Paul had some time between missionary journeys and had never been to Athens. He had been chased out of three cities by strong opposition to his teaching. His friends feared for his life and so they sent him off to Athens for some R & R. Someone might have said, "Paul, you look stressed, the situation is tense - why not take a break and see the sites in Athens? After all, all work and no play makes for an unhappy boy!"

So Paul finds himself stuck in Athens, alone, with nothing to do and only one command from his friends, "stay out of trouble!" The reluctant tourist takes in the sites, tours the famous city to find out about its renowned people. He finds city shrines and altars dedicated to a variety of idols and a pantheon of gods. He debates their existence wherever and with whomever he can - in the synagogue with the Jews, in the marketplace with the buyers, in the town center of the intellectual capitol of the world with the philosophers.

Paul loved engaging people who were religious seekers – non-practicing Jews, religiously minded Greeks. Paul got most of his converts from folk who were halfway there toward a belief in Christ. He would be very comfortable with the 95% of Americans who say they believe in God but who hold widely diverse opinions as to the character of God – the many who want to keep a God who is worshiped and followed at a safe distance.

Paul notices their alter to an "Unknown God". Legend has it that a plague hit Athens three centuries earlier and that a wise man had said there was an "unknown god" that could stay the plague if the Athenians built an alter to him. The altar was built, the plague disappeared, and the alter remained. Paul commends them for their attention to religion, but he says: "You have forgotten the source of your genius and creativity. You have been living as self-made people. You live like orphans, ignorant of your parents, the source in whom you live and move and have your being". Simply put: "Remember you are the offspring of God!"

All of us, no matter how independent or secure or introverted, are seeking to be connected, to belong, to be brought home again. One of the most basic longings of being human is the desire to know and be belong. All of us understand what it feels like to be orphaned, to be alone, to be lost. No matter how terrific our parents, all of us can sing the words of the spiritual, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home." It is a part of our human journey, this feeling of loneliness and separation.

The longing we know, the hunger and fear of our time is connected with the same hunger/fear of the people in Athens. They had it all, as Paul could see. But they were disconnected from their strength, their source of grounding. They were cut off from their spiritual parent and source of creating love. They were missing the connection to spiritual truth and wholeness, their chance to

belong. Sam Keen says, *“Finally, God is not an object to be know or a problem to be solved by human intelligence, but God is the ground beneath our capacity to understand anything, the totality within which we live, move and have our being.”*

The restlessness, the weariness, the vague longing many feel today may very well be our homesickness and our longing to belong to God, to come home to love and the spiritual journey which is a part of each one of our lives.

So now, Paul the reluctant tourist, in the intellectual capital of the world, shares his witness. He is good at it. He knew how to start where they were, not where he was. He didn't rail and condemn and reject their beliefs. He simply observed that they were striving for fulfillment through what is unknown, spending time and energy and making sacrifices in many different directions.

Paul went on to say, *“There is one God. That God created us all. This is not your god or our god, but the God of all people, not a god distant from us, not a god that we can control, and certainly not a god that we can reduce to a statue. Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.”*

The reluctant tourist Paul gives us thoughtful insight into the culture of Athens and to our nation and here in Seattle. We are moving into what is being called “postmodernism”, the shifting of the cultural axis, dynamic change. It is almost as if we live in a postmodern Athens: all the idols for the gods, all the images, all the exploding new thoughts. How do we in the faith community effectively speak to and reach those in these postmodern days?

But much more than a cultural understanding of Bible times I suggest we look at how Paul practiced what is called “spiritual friendship” to engage the people of Athens. How Paul built a bridge to those outside the faith. I believe there are clues for us today as we seek to reach out and relate to those around us in our world today.

Paul proclaimed the good news with a spirit of respect and not domination. He had a tone of invitation and not insistence, relatedness and not rejection. These attitudes make up a posture of hospitality which fosters kinship rather than estrangement, transformation rather than entrenchment. In spiritual friendship we are all changed as we endeavor to draw closer to God.

There are so many raucous religious noises in America today. So much religious talk is notably ungenerous. “We're right; you're wrong. Our way or the highway.” Paul in his address reminds that we all have something in common, *“The God who made the world and everything in it.”*

Spiritual friendship means when approaching a friend you look for what you already have in common, before sharing how you've been turned on to your religious quest. You start out generously. In Paul's stunning talk we see how the Christian faith actually commends itself to seekers of truth by its willingness to find the common ground, by its generosity of spirit – coupled paradoxically by a willingness to call a spade a spade and an idol an idol. Paul does not shy away from the truth that a sustained spiritual journey is not easy and it's not fast. There is an adventurous quality of faith that moves us out into the marketplace instead of simply in the church building.

Spiritual friendship is at once innovative, and at the same time, remarkably timeless. So much of what passes for evangelism today is focused on ideas like conversion, conquest, war, proofs, and arguments. Spiritual friendship focuses on ideas like conversation, influence and one favorite description "dance". True dance has no winner or loser; instead it is an interactive experience in which both parties must cooperate. Understanding ourselves as a spiritual friend enables you to share the joy and purpose your life has because of God in a deep, meaningful way with your postmodern neighbor. They are yearning for that kind of joy and purpose, and they are eager to find true, faithful friendship.

Queen Anne is a lot like Paul. You are planted in the middle of all the idols and gods of this hill and those so visible as you look down over the city. Your New Beginnings assessment describes your shifts in recent years: deeper spiritual commitment, reclaiming hospitable, open space in order to welcome others. What a context in which to experience "spiritual friendship", the holy conversation, the real dance of life. Look around your hill and see what's happening. Find those places where you can make contact with this religious marketplace. Find the places where you can make contact with people. Intentionally look around. Start where the person is, with what they share with you, not with what you want to share with them! The time for telling the Gospel and talking about faith will come, but first you have to walk across the bridge, make the connection.

Mava Dawn, commenter on the church says that the church is not going backwards because we have the wrong music, or the wrong kind of worship or the wrong kinds of pastors, but because we are not willing to give up enough of our time and our love and our comfort to walk across those bridges and meet people. That makes me really think. And I hope it does the same for you.





