



“Athens and Columbus”
Acts 17:16-34
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Rev. Amy Miracle
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

As a young adult, I lived for a time in Ireland. Before that experience, I always thought of myself as a fairly skilled conversationalist. I had good instincts for when to speak and when to listen.

I would go out with my Irish friends. There would be four to eight of us crowded around a table. The conversation never lagged. The story telling was lively. There was a beautiful rhythm to the evenings with everyone taking a turn telling a story or sharing their insights. Except me. For the life of me, I could never figure out the pattern of when to jump in and when to hand off to someone else.

I discovered that my skills and experience, my usual bag of tricks, were of little or no use in this new setting.

The apostle Paul has his bag of tricks, his thing, his shtick, his way of doing things. When he goes into a new city, he heads straight to the synagogue. It is familiar to him; he is comfortable there; these are his people. He goes to the synagogue and uses scriptures to tell people about Jesus. Some places this approach is pretty successful. And then it stops working. In Thessalonica, he and Silas incite a riot; in Berea, they are driven out of town. The way in which they have gone about the work of the church isn't working anymore.

Does any part of this story sound familiar? There was a day when the American church only needed to open its doors, offer quality worship, some good solid programming for children, youth and adults and people would come – lots of people. Those days are over. For all sorts of reasons - many of them out of the church's control:

- a growing distrust of institutions
- a culture wide decline in participation in voluntary associations
- compelling competition – other organizations and experiences that can deliver some of the things traditionally associated with faith communities

Let me give you two examples of that competition:

Pickleball leagues provide all sorts of good things for people: community, connection, exercise, and an opportunity to sprain your ankle. That's something church has never provided. And then there is SoulCycle, a fitness company which offers indoor cycling and spinning workout classes and as their name suggest so much more: candles, music, charismatic leaders, transcendence, accountability, community. These are just two examples of what's out there providing the kind of good stuff that once was the near sole domain of congregations.

And then there are the things the American church has done to itself. Things like infighting, splits, sexual misconduct, financial scandals, adherence to outdated rituals and practices. On any given Sunday, a person can wander into a U.S. congregation and find something there that is soul numbingly boring and/or profoundly irrelevant.

The old approach of "do good church and people will come" isn't working anymore.

Back to Paul. After he leaves Thessalonica and Berea, he finds himself in Athens. At this point in its history Athens is past its prime. It is no longer the political and economic hub it has once been. But it is still an important intellectual and educational center. The leaders and teachers of the two pre-dominant schools of philosophy, the Stoics and the Epicureans, have established themselves there. There is a university. Athenians think of themselves as urban, educated, open to new ideas.

Does any of this story sound familiar?

Many different gods are worshipped in Athens. Every Saturday during the fall months, the people gather in a stone edifice to participate in a strange ritual. Those on the field gather into two teams. They wear costumes including elaborate helmets. They play a game that looks a lot like battle. Music is played; songs are sung. There is cheering; food and alcohol are consumed. Throughout the whole thing they worship a pagan god named Brutus. (OK, I made some of that up.)

But does any of this story sound familiar?

When he arrives in Athens, Paul is supposed to wait for his colleagues Silas and Timothy. While he is waiting, he explores the city. He meets some of the locals. He listens to them. They listen to him. They invite him to come with them to Areopagus, a place in Athens where philosophers and poets and intellectuals go every day to engage one another in conversation and where others come to listen, learn and be amused.

Paul is taken to the Areopagus and is invited to speak. At this point in his work, Paul has a stump speech that he can recite in his sleep. He doesn't use it that day. Faced with a new audience and a new setting, Paul takes a different approach.

He begins his comments by referring to the Athenian's spiritual hunger. He then uses their own language and their own images to connect that spiritual hunger to the story of Jesus, although he never mentions Jesus by name. His choice of words communicates that he had taken the time to get to know those gathered there that day – who they are – what matters to them.

I haven't been too subtle in my suggestion that twenty-first century Columbus has a few things in common with first-century Athens. I love this text because it feels so modern to me. As though Paul wandered into Columbus one day.

We too live in a time and place where there is a marketplace of ideas, where the claims of Christianity have to compete with the claims of other faith traditions and belief systems. And there are just a lot of compelling options of how to spend our time and energy.

As was true in Athens, here in Columbus there is spiritual hunger amongst people that is real and profound. Folks are searching for something or some place that can help them encounter the holy, support them in making a difference in the world, and give them a sense of community.

How do we connect with that spiritual hunger? First of all, we respect it. We relate to it, not as people who have the answers but as folks who share that hunger.

How do we connect with that spiritual hunger? By paying attention to what people are up to these days. Listen to them. Watch what they watch. Listen to what they listen to. Try to discern what matters to them, what questions they are asking. Assume that they know things we don't know. That God is at work in their lives. That they have more to teach us than we have to teach them. That's the starting point.

How do we connect with that spiritual hunger, that longing for community? We've already established that the old way of being and doing church doesn't work anymore. So, we try things. We have a TV in our worship space/We have screens in the sanctuary. We have tables up front for our kids. We take risks. All in the service of sharing God's love with the world.

Take online worship. It's still so new. We aren't particularly good at it yet. We are still figuring out how to create community in this online space. Last week we offered zoom communion to our online worshippers. This is the fourth time we have done this. It was pretty awesome. Here are two photos from zoom communion – one from the first time we did this and another showing one of the participants set-up for celebrating communion from their home. We continue to look for ways to connect and gather our online worshipping community.

Like I said we are still figuring all of this out. Most Sundays, we record ourselves on our smartphones pretty close up. Recording worship this still feels risky and vulnerable. I don't really like thinking of my face being so big on people's screens. Then I hear Paul reaching out over the many centuries saying, get over yourself Amy!!

We can learn so much from Paul. That day in Athens, his words are masterful and effective. So, it's easy to forget how hard this must be for him. This is not Paul's usual thing. These are not his people. He is alone – no partner, no back-up. It must be scary and I'm certain that he feels vulnerable and awkward.

Somehow Paul puts aside all of his doubts and he speaks. He is able to do that because he keeps in mind an important truth. He says to himself: "This isn't about me. It is about God. And about these people who are hungry and thirsty for something more, something better – they are hungry for God."

That's why the church posts on Facebook and Instagram. That's why we offer online worship. Because the potential benefits are huge. Because there is a lot at stake. Because a life lived out in relationship to God supported and challenged by the community of the faithful is the best possible life. All that seems worth a little awkwardness and vulnerability.

Today, or later this week, I encourage you to invite someone to check out Broad Street's in person or online worship. Chances are you know someone who might benefit from connecting with God in this way. Be warned, you might feel a little awkward.

Our role model for all of this is God. We worship a God who is persistent, resourceful, eager to do just about anything to connect with us. We worship a God who is willing to be vulnerable – to become human, to sit down with us to share a meal with us, to die on a cross for us. We worship a God who is always inviting, encouraging, calling, welcoming and in that invitation risking rejection. All of this God does in order to be closer to us.

We try to do the same thing. We risk awkwardness and vulnerability because that's how we get to the good stuff. That's how we get to God.