

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 21, 2017  
The Rev. Bill Queen  
"You Are Missionaries"  
Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22

imagine that you are in a foreign country as a missionary and your job is to interest the local people in your religion, Christianity; they don't know anything about your religion; and, to make it even harder, their culture regards itself in very high esteem and looks down upon anyone who suggests they need to make any kind of change in their lifestyle; how might you go about gaining the interest of these uninterested people?; it turns out that our story from Acts chapter 17 this morning is one of the best Biblical examples of how to do this

but wait; you may be thinking that you are not missionaries in a foreign country, and you don't intend to sign up to do this, so you really don't need to learn how to do this, do you?; well, let's drop just the one word "foreign" and recognize that missionary work goes on in any place and at any time that you, as a believer, find yourself in the company of anyone who is not a believer; and if studies are accurate, the majority of people you currently come into contact with on a daily basis are not believers, by their own admission; and, by the way, you did sign up to do this; remember the question in the Baptismal Covenant that is asked each time there is a baptism: "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?;" and everyone responds: "I will, with God's help;" you not only signed up to be a 'witness'--another name for 'missionary'--you keep reaffirming your promise, over and over

so, missionaries, let's look at the example Paul gives us as instruction; to get the full picture, it's helpful to get a running start on the passage, going back several verses ahead of where our reading starts; Paul is in Athens, and the first thing he does there is tour the city and observes carefully the people and their practices; he talks with people to find out what makes them tick: what they believe, what they hope and fear; and he shares just enough about what he believes, that is different from their views, that they are intrigued by him; they invite him to speak about his beliefs at the Areopagus, or Mars Hill; it was like a debate club, or the Richmond Forum; he'd gotten himself an

audience of interested listeners

our passage today picks up as he addresses this group; notice that he does not immediately launch into preaching his personal witness or explaining Christian beliefs; it is not time for that yet; first he talks about what he's observed and learned about them; he flatters them a bit, saying that he recognized they were a religious people; he refers to an altar he'd seen in Athens that was dedicated to "an unknown God;" he'd recognized that there was a gap in their beliefs; they had some uncertainty and some fear that even with their large pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses, perhaps they'd missed one; their religion is what we now term 'mythology,' but it was to them religion, period; they prayed, offered sacrifices, and donated time and money to those gods and goddesses

only then does Paul go on to talk about the Christian conception of how God in Christ fills the gap and fits the need that he had recognized these Greeks had; and because to talk about God in either a Jewish or Christian context would be totally foreign to them, he talks about God using familiar words, quotes from two of their Greek poets; he had listened to them so carefully and remembered what was important to them, that he was able to explain this new idea of God to them in their own words, in a way that was immediately understandable to them

and how did they receive what he said?; you have to read a bit beyond this passage to get the full story, but it turns out that different people had different reactions to him; it says that "some scoffed" and were not interested in what he had to say; some others were interested, but needed more time to think about it; they definitely wanted to hear more from him after they had some time to process what they'd heard; and some others were convinced enough to immediately become believers; and he was OK with each of these different responses; he planned an appropriate kind of follow-up with each of the different groups

my suspicion is that if he had jumped immediately into preaching, "Jesus died on the cross for your sins, repent and believe!" he'd have been laughed out of town without a single convert; notice that he does say to them, "repent," but he says it in the context of a wider discussion, and he says it, as we find recommended in Peter's 1st Epistle today, "with gentleness and reverence;" most importantly, everything he said to them was in the context of a

relationship he had previously begun to build with them, by getting to know them and appreciate them for who they were

so, missionaries, let's review what Paul did, in terms of what you can do; he started with a desire to reach out to people who did not know Jesus; he was willing to go and meet them on their own turf and on their own terms; he got to know people and let them tell him about what they really wanted and needed--he built a relationship with them; he was patient, waiting until people were eager to hear more from him; he spoke in terms they they could understand; he was OK with any response people gave him; he was careful to go back for follow-up and follow-through with anyone who needed to hear more, or with anyone who just needed more time to think; do you think you could do something like this, starting small, with one person you care about?

you are a missionary and your job is to interest the people around you; not to interest them in believing or becoming like you; not to interest them in joining your church; you are to interest them in experiencing God in Christ for themselves--wherever that may lead them; many, many people around you really don't know hardly anything about the Christian faith; the culture around us, in general, does not want to hear about making any kind of a change in lifestyle; but think, pray, and plan how you might go about gaining the interest of any seemingly uninterested person; think, pray, and plan how you might go about being a missionary where you live and work and play; think, pray, and plan how you might, with God's help, go about proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ