

Ripples: Part 24
Defending our Faith
Acts 17.16-35

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Two questions are raised and wrestled with in the passage of Scripture we're studying today.

The first, for those who are followers of Jesus:

How do we have a faith conversation with someone whose morals or beliefs are radically different from our own? We live in a world that dabbles in beliefs of all sorts. You can find people who believe in almost anything, and you can find people who justify doing almost anything on the basis of their beliefs.

How do you have a faith conversation with someone whose beliefs and whose choices you disagree with or even believe to be wrong?

I was thinking about this in my own life. In recent months I've had, or have attempted to have, spiritual conversations with a Sikh doctor, a New Age nurse, a gay neighbor, a woman from South America who believes her childhood Catholic faith has nothing to offer her, a swearing shuttle bus driver calling down curses on her dead father, and a far-right-wing conspiracy-theorist Uber driver.

How do we have a faith conversation with someone whose morals or beliefs are different from our own? That's a question this passage raises for those of us who are part of the Christian faith, and who are trying to figure out a faithful way to walk through this religiously and morally plural world.

And here's a question that this passage raises for those of us who are *not* followers of Christ, and who are from another faith, or have no faith at all, but who are trying to figure out what life is all about, why are we here, and how we are supposed to be connected to the one who gave us life?

There are a lot of different faith and life philosophy options out there. How do we know that we have found the truth? That's the question this passage raises for those who aren't followers of Jesus. How sure are we that we've found the answer: am I living the good life, a life worth living, the life I was made to live?

We're in a study walking through a New Testament book called the Book of Acts, which is a short historical account of the early church in its first three decades. The last couple of Sundays we've been following the apostle Paul, a convert from Judaism to Christianity, and some of his companions on his second missionary journey. You may remember we left them last Sunday in Berea, in northern Greece, where Paul was teaching in a synagogue.

The Bereans were very responsive to what Paul taught. As we saw last Sunday, the Bereans received his teaching with openness and we're told in 17.12 that

Acts 17.12

As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men.

Then, once again, Paul gets run out of town – just as he did in Thessalonica, and in Philippi before that. Luke tells us what happens starting in 17.13.

Acts 17.13-15

But when some Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble. The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those escorting Paul went with him all the way to Athens; then they returned to Berea with instructions for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him.

Paul's Second Mission Journey



Athens is all the way around on the far left side of this map, straight south of Berea. Paul has now travelled approximately 1350 miles from Antioch to Athens, most of it on foot.

Here's a picture of what ancient Athens looks like today.

Ancient Athens



It would have been a glorious city when Paul was there. This is a picture of the center of the city looking north. You can see the Acropolis, that high rock mound in the center, with the Parthenon on top. That's the temple where the goddess Athena was worshiped, built four centuries before Paul arrived.

From where we are, the Areopagus – the meeting place for the city council – would have been just over the crest of the hill to the left, and the huge open market, the *agora*, lined with its towering rows of covered columns called *stoa*, was located just past the Areopagus, tucked down in the valley on the other side of this ridge to the left.

Luke goes on:

Acts 17.16

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Let me stop there . . .

Athens was full of altars, idols, and temples to the gods. Just in the main marketplace, which Paul would have passed through on his way into the city, there was the temple to Ares, the Stoa of Zeus with a statue of him, the Altar to the Twelve Gods and a painting of them, the temple of Hephaestus, plus altars to Themis, Eueteria, Hekate, Hermes and more.

And as we already saw, towering over the agora and the whole city was the Parthenon, for the worship of Athena, and a forty-foot high statue of Athena made out of ivory and gold..

No wonder there was a popular saying in ancient times that said, *"In Athens, there are more gods than men."*

Luke tells us that what Paul saw greatly troubled him. It says he was greatly distressed, deeply troubled, profoundly unsettled.

Not a surprise, given his deep Jewish roots. Deuteronomy 27 says idols are an abomination to the Lord. Hosea 2 says when you worship idols it is like committing spiritual adultery against God. And Exodus 20, which prohibits worshiping idols, says we and our children and our children's children will be punished if we do.

On top of that, Paul is now a devoted follower of Jesus.

He believes life's meaning is found only in being rightly related to God, and that the only good life is a godly life, a life of enjoying and serving the God who created us and created all things.

And he believes there is only one way into right relationship with God, and that is through Jesus, by giving Jesus our full allegiance as King, putting the weight of our lives on him.

No wonder he is deeply distressed as he walks through this city filled with idols and altars and temples to false gods.

On a Seminary in a Suitcase trip to Nepal, Mark Bleyer and I spent an afternoon walking through the streets of Kathmandu. We saw a temple on nearly every block, Hindu temples for Shiva, and Vishnu and Krishna, and Buddhist temples, and we saw a nine-year-old girl who was worshiped as a living goddess, and we walked past a temple where we were told they performed child sacrifices, and it was so deeply unsettling for us, because our convictions are like Paul's.

So let me pause there. Imagine you are Paul. Back to the question: How do you have a faith conversation with someone whose beliefs and whose choices you disagree with or believe to be wrong?

Given what he saw as he walked through the streets of Athens, what might Paul's response to the Athenians have been?

It isn't hard to picture him lashing together a huge wooden cross and getting an apple crate and a megaphone and standing up in the corner of the agora with a spray painted sign that says "You Athenians are an abomination to God because of your idol-worship. Repent or you will go to hell." That would have been faithful to what he felt, and to the teaching of Scripture. And what do you imagine might have been their response?

Now, let's think about the Athenians and where they're coming from. What do we know about them? Let's pick up in the passage and see what we can learn about where they are coming from.

Acts 17.16-17

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

Acts 17.18

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.

Let me just pause there.

Athens wasn't just a religious city. It was also the birthplace of essentially all of the major schools of Greek philosophy. Athens was where Socrates lived and taught, and Plato, and Aristotle, and Zeno, who founded Stoicism, and Epicurus, the founder of the Epicureans.

By the time Paul arrived in Athens, three hundred years after the last of these great philosophers died, there were two main schools of thought that still held sway in Athens: the Stoics and the Epicureans.

Philosophy has as its goal the desire to define what makes life good and meaningful. Different philosophies offer different suggestions about the best sort of life to live.

The Stoics and the Epicureans offered almost opposite visions of the good life.

Epicureanism says the good life is a life full of enjoyment and free of trouble, whether or not you are virtuous.

The Stoic school, on the other hand, says the good life is a life full of virtue, and free of vice, whether or not your life is free of troubles.

So the people of Athens were wrestling with the question of what made life meaningful.

At least, some of them were. You get the sense from a comment that comes later in the passage that by the time Paul arrived in Athens, philosophical discussion had shifted from an ardent pursuit of truth to a way to pass the time. And instead of upholding the great philosophical traditions of the past, they were surfing for the latest, trendy ideas.

Look at what it says a few verses later – that last phrase in parentheses.

Acts 17.21

(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

So if you were an Athenian, and you were asking questions about what made for a good and meaningful life, and you encountered a person like Paul, what sort of response might you give to a person like him?

It seems like it would be easy for them to just dismiss Paul, to ignore him. Or they could have opposed him, and tried to silence him. Or they could have tried to get rid of him, as others before him had done.

So imagine you are an Athenian. Here you are in a world of hundreds of worldviews, and you are sorting out what your own philosophy of life is, and along comes Paul, talking about a king who opens the way to God, so we can know him personally, and about the possibility of being raised to new life – all strange and new ways of thinking. What might be your response?

All right, we've looked at Paul, and we know what he believes. And we've looked at the Athenians, and we know the questions they are asking. We've thought about how both of them *could* respond.

Now let's look at how they actually do respond, and think about how their example might inform us.

First the Athenians – those who are wrestling with questions about the meaning of life in the midst of all these options. We actually see a mixed response.

Acts 17.18

Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Some of them were quick to judge and dismiss his unfamiliar ideas. "What is this babbler – literally, this seed picker, this person who is just grabbing ideas here and there without understanding any of them and trying to pass them along as though he knows what he is talking about – what is this babbler trying to say?"

Others seemed at least half-heartedly interested in what he was teaching. They remark, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." But are they really interested in what he is teaching? Or are they just interested in debating? It seems as though they're not really asking what his teaching might have to do with them, and their lives. They're just debating ideas. His teaching is held at arm's length.

But certainly among them there were men and women who were asking the deep and probing questions that every human being eventually asks about where they came from and why they were here and where they are going and what makes their life worth living and whether or not the God who created us can be known – and they are wrestling with where they can turn to get answers to those deepest of questions.

Perhaps it was them. Perhaps it was someone from the group of the idly curious. However it comes about, some of the key leaders in Athens, members of the city council called the Areopagus, invite Paul to come and speak to them.

Acts 17.19-20

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”

The Athenians could have just sent Paul on his way. But instead, they take his teaching seriously, at least seriously enough to hear him out, and they are open to the possibility that what he has to say might actually address some of those deep questions they are asking about the meaning of life.

In that respect they offer a great example to those of you who are not yet followers of Christ when they encounter the Christian message? They are willing, at least some of them, to wrestle with what it claims, and whether or not it might be true.

And now let's look at how Paul chooses to respond. Instead of judging them, or responding out of anger about their beliefs, or repugnance about their choices, he chooses to step toward them with love and respect.

Those of us who are followers of Christ, let's see what we can learn from the example of Paul's response as he shares his faith with people whose views are very different from his own.

First let me make a few observations from the passages we've already read:

1. First, he moves towards them, rather than pulling back from them. He lets his concern for their spiritual wellbeing motivate him to engage with them rather than letting it disengage. We saw that he dialogued with them in the marketplace, and he accepted their invitation to their council meeting.

We've talked in the past about those two opposite instincts we can have when we encounter morals or beliefs that we believe to be wrong or that we find offensive.

To judge a person, which happens when we can't separate our view of a person from what they believe or how they act, and which we're told not to do in Matthew 7.1, leads us to pull back from that person and push them away.

Or to accept a person, which we do when we are able to separate the regard we have for a person from what they believe and how they act, and which we are called to do in Romans 15.7, leads us to move toward that person and draw them in toward us.

2. The second thing he does is to speak up about his faith. In one of his letters Paul says, "I believe, therefore I speak." When we've got him, we cannot help but share him.

But as he does so, when he speaks up about his faith, he is clear in his mind about what is God's job and what is his job.

In 17.18 it says literally that Paul is "good-news-ing." That's what the word evangelism means. Announcing the good news, the *evangel*, of Jesus.

Notice what he isn't doing. It doesn't say he is proselytizing, which means "making converts." That isn't his job. That's God's job.

And we see the incredible freedom that gives Paul as he speaks. He isn't offended on God's behalf, either by their wrong beliefs or morals or by their failure to believe.

He is free to have a conversation instead of trying to win an argument and shove his hearers into a new point of view.

He doesn't take it personally when people don't respond to his message. It is God's job to convict and awaken a heart and draw it to faith.

His job is just to tell the joyful news of who Jesus is, the difference he has made in his own life, and the difference he can make in their life.

Let's look at the next section and see what else we can learn.

Acts 17.22-23

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Just a quick comment on that last line. The word "ignorant" usually has a negative connotation, and while the word could be translated that way, I don't think that's at all consistent with the tone Paul is communicating. He's not judging them for not knowing God. I like the ERV, which simply says:

You worship a god that you don't know. This is the God I want to tell you about.

3. Third principle: Paul communicates genuine love and respect, not judgment and disdain. In spite of how distressed he was by what he saw in the city, he entrusts to God whatever he felt about what he saw, and he opens himself to be a vessel of God's love for the people before him.

He could have said the equivalent of, "You idiots. You're spiritually lost and your lives are morally offensive and you're going to hell." Instead, he speaks with genuine warmth and respect and graciousness. That way there is a possibility they will actually hear his message.

4. Fourth, Paul listened and observed before he spoke. It is clear from what follows that Paul has been a careful and attentive student of the Athenians. For several days, it seems, he has wandered through the city and made careful observations and asked questions. Only then has he spoken.

If this were a conversation between two people just getting to know each other, it seems likely Paul would have spent most of the time asking questions, listening, exploring the person's story, before then bringing the good news to bear.

Part of this fourth principle is that he is culturally observant.

For one thing, he notices a statue to an unknown god, and undoubtedly has asked questions and learned the amazing story behind it, of a plague that hit Athens six centuries before, and how sacrifices were made to all the gods to try to appease them and get them to stop the plague, and how the plague continued in spite of all the sacrifices, and then how a prophet and poet named Epimenides was brought in, and how he encouraged the city to make sacrifices to the Unknown God, right there on the Areopagus Hill where they were meeting, and how as soon as they did the plague came to an end.

I love how Paul studied the culture until he found this redemptive analogy, this point of connection with the gospel, and used it to make a connection with the people of Athens with whom he was speaking. We talked last week about what great students of the Scriptures the Bereans were. Paul's example encourages us to be equally great students of our culture.

But there's another dimension to this. Raising the idea of the unknown god isn't just a cool speaker's trick.

5. A fifth principle: Paul trusts that God is at work.

Even though he ended up in Athens unexpectedly, Paul is confident that God has already been at work long before this moment, as is obvious in this story about the

unknown god, and Paul is confident that God is at work in this moment as well, in the lives of the very people with whom he is speaking right now.

He speaks with confidence that God goes before him into this moment and is stirring souls and readying hearts even now.

This God you don't know? This God who saved this city? Wouldn't you like to know him? That's why I'm here. That's why he sent me here. To tell you about him, so that you can come to know him.

Let's read on.

Acts 17.24-25

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, "as if he needed anything." Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

Acts 17.26-28

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

Acts 17.28-29

As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.

Acts 17.30

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

Acts 17.31

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

Here are three more principles that come through in these passages.

6. Sixth, Paul doesn't start with where he is, or with where he wants them to be. He starts right where they are.

They don't acknowledge the authority of the Scriptures so he doesn't quote or argue from them.

They believe the divine, whether that be one god or many, makes itself know through creation, so he starts there.

They have respect for their Greek poets and philosophers so he quotes from them in several different places.

And they revere Epimenides, so he quotes one of his most famous lines, so famous that he doesn't even need to mention his name: 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

Paul starts right where they are. He begins with their perspective, their values, their authorities, and their beliefs.

Then . . . he builds a bridge across from the things they believe to the things that are actually true.

For example, Paul bridges

From the idea that Zeus is the main god (also known as Jupiter to the Romans), to the idea that there is just one God, the Lord God Almighty, and that the other gods are mere idols.

From the idea that the gods are to be manipulated through our sacrifices to get from them what we want, to the idea that the God who created us and gave us life knows and provides for everything we need.

From the idea that God is unknown, to the idea that God can be known, and seeks to be known.

From the idea that we can live our lives without reference to the gods to the idea that God created us to live our lives for him, and that we will one day stand before God and be called upon to give answer for our life.

7. Seventh, Paul appeals to the spiritual hunger that God has planted in all of us.

I love this line in 17.27:

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Notice how he touches on the sense that we all have that there is more to this life, that there is another dimension just beyond our sight, a spiritual dimension, that there is an Author of us and of everything we see and experience, and notice how he touches on the longing that we each have to get our hands on him, to experience him, to come to know him.

Paul says God is already moving toward us, and if we reach out for him, we can get hold of him, and he can lay hold of us. He seems far away because we can't see him, but he is not far from any of us. He is near, and he can be known.

8. The eighth and last thing I want you to notice is the way Paul brings the whole discussion around to Jesus. Although it doesn't say his name in verse 31, that's who he is talking about. As we saw in verse 17.19, it was because Paul was telling the good news *about Jesus* that the Athenians asked Paul to come and speak with them in the first place.

Paul starts by addressing the religious and philosophical questions they are asking. What is true about the universe? What is true about life? What is true about God? He doesn't dismiss those. But eventually, as he does here, Paul always leads the conversation to the most important question of all. What about this Jesus?

Think about this. Every religion and every philosophy seeks to answer the questions of how we can know God and how we can be good, but only in Jesus does God come to us and make himself known, and only in Jesus does God die for us and forgive our sin and our failure to be good, and then put his Spirit in us and make it possible for us to be good.

Paul says in Colossians 1.28, "We proclaim *him*."

So now we've seen Paul's posture toward the Athenians and his response to their invitation, and we find in him a great example of how we as followers of Christ might respond to others as we seek to share our faith across lines of difference.

So, how did the Athenians respond to what Paul shared?

Well, their response was mixed.

Acts 17.32-33

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council.

Some dismissed him. Others were curious and were willing to hear more. But some . . . some listened to what Paul shared, and took it to heart. They heard in what Paul shared the answer to their deep longing to discover what made life meaningful, and how to be rightly related to the God who created them and gave them life. We read about them in the last line of the story.

And now the story becomes not about a group, but about individuals, with names, and how they respond to the invitation to trust and follow Jesus.

Acts 17.34

Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

So, if you are a follower of Jesus, I wonder how God is inviting you to pattern after Paul your own conversations across lines of difference.

And if you are not a follower of Christ, but are exploring the Christian faith, I wonder how God might be inviting you to pattern your response after that of Dionysius and Damaris and the others who responded by opening their lives to Jesus in faith.

The same unknown God who made himself known 20 centuries ago is still making himself known today. The same Jesus, who died and rose to life, is still coming face to face with men and women today, and leading them into a good and godly life of meaning and purpose, the life for which we were made.

Today, as we close, two members of our church family are going to share with us how God has made himself known to them, and brought them to life in Christ, and changed their lives.