Disconnecting and Recentering
Acts 17:22-31
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Washington Street UMC
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Will you join me in a centering breath? Take a deep breath in and just hold it for a moment … now exhale.

Let's do that again: breath in and hold it hold … now exhale.

When I first bought this Apple watch a couple years ago, it would regularly vibrate on my wrist to invite me to a moment of breathing exercises. The invitation startled me at first. It always seemed to come at a moment when I really needed to take a breath, as if Siri was somehow monitoring my stress level and knew I needed that breath in that moment.

I've noticed recently that Siri doesn't ask me to take as many breathing moments as they used to. I'm certain it's not because I feel any less stressed. My theory is that Siri got tired of being ignored or told no, and instead of giving me the opportunity to say "no" to the breathing request, Siri just doesn't ask me anymore.

But here, in this Fifth Sunday of Lent, it feels appropriate to take a pause and catch our breath. The next few weeks, with Palm Sunday, Holy Week Services, and Easter tend to come fast and furious, and when you throw Spring Break into the mix for our local schools … well it's just downright frantic for many of our families.

So again, let's breath in and hold it for a moment … and exhale.

Sometimes what we need most is a moment of pause: a chance to disconnect and to recenter ourselves.

I find that invitation to disconnect and recenter to be the primary invitation of our Biblical text this morning in Acts 17.

In the Book of Acts, our gospel writer Luke is journaling the life of the early church. From the Church's inception at Pentecost, to the expansion of the Church in the cities around the Mediterranean Sea, Luke shares the adventures of Paul and Peter as the Spirit works through them to expand the church from the land and people of Israel to the Gentiles from all cultures and locales. In this text, Paul is in Athens, speaking to the people of Greece.

Not only is Paul in Athens speaking to the Greeks, he's speaking at the center of intellectualism in Athens – at the Areopagus. Today, the title Areopagus refers to a rock outcropping located northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, which derives its title from the name "Hill of Ares." In the days of Paul, the Areopagus also referred to the Athenian governing council. It is believed the council met at the rock outcropping, hence the name.

As Scholar Katherine Shaner offers, “Those at the Areopagus were hungry for new ways to think, new images to contemplate, new possibilities for understanding the world. While that was not always a complement in the Roman Empire (what was old was considered stable and authoritative), the fact that Paul’s Areopagan listeners wanted to hear more about the “rather strange” teaching puts Paul among the most innovative and philosophical leaders in the Roman world.”[i]

Let’s listen again to the words of Paul as he stood in front of the Athenians, “I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.””

Now, I’m sure to us, this introduction doesn’t sound amazing. I mean, even if we don’t know who our God is, we have the language down.

This past fall, I drove down to my alma mater, Ferrum College, which is located about 40 miles south of Roanoke, Virginia. It’s a drive I’m very familiar with, having driven from Ferrum to DC almost every week during my first three years of graduate work at Wesley Seminary. It’s a beautiful stretch of Virginia interstate, running down the Shenandoah Valley, if you can just look beyond the sheer volume of semis who use I-81 as a major commerce route.

As I drove down this past fall, I noticed something I hadn’t ever seen before. Every 20-30 miles, there was a small sign stapled to a telephone pole. Every sign was the exact same, was printed in the same colors, and read the same words: “Jesus Saves.” I’ll save the theological argument for another time that the sign should have read, “Jesus Saved,” with a *d* on the end instead of an *s.* But, as I read our passage from Acts this morning, these signs came to the forefront of my mind. “I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the country and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an sign with the inscription, “Jesus Saves.”

The Athenians may have been impressed – this outsider had taken note of their worship. That he was so clearly engaged in their space, so clearly attuned to their worship, they may have leaned in to hear him better.

Paul continued, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”

Paul made the claim in 1 Corinthians that, for the purpose of sharing the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, he would become all things for all people. This story in Athens seems to fit that bill. To make clear that gospel of Christ in a realm of intellectualism, Paul used the language of intellectualism to speak to the Athenians. Bishop William Willimon notes that in this text, “Paul borders upon a “natural theology” – our observation of the natural world and its wonders is a forerunner of the faith.” Bishop Willimon continues by asking, “How can people look up at the stars and ponder the mysteries of the world without imagining a real, though still unknown, divine force behind it all?”[ii]

Paul continues with this use of intellectualism in his sermon, openly quoting from Greek poetry, “In him we live and move and have our being … For we too are his offspring.” He’s using their own language to

affirm the message of God in Jesus Christ … only, he hasn't explicitly said anything about Jesus Christ yet.

Up until this point, Paul is offering little more than an affirmation to the Athenians who worshipped this "unknown" god. He is using their platform, the inscriptions on their altars, their pagan practices, and the language of their poets to highlight just how close they are to understanding *truth.* Paul is speaking in affirmation of their willingness to search, and to acknowledge that there is a divine power beyond their comprehension. Even beyond Israel, who, as a people, have long known God as Creator and Sustainer … these Greeks, these Gentiles, they too "honor God,"[iii] they just haven't been able to identity God as of yet.

After spending the bulk of his message affirming their curiosity, Paul then offers a few sharp and pointed statements. Paul speaks, "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."

These are the Greeks he's speaking to – those who created some of the most famous statues known in history. And yet, Paul says, no physical representation that you can draw, carve, or mold is sufficient to depict

Paul continues with one final statement, "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and on this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Theologian Willie James Jennings offers an important note about Paul's closing retort as he writes, "All religious speech, not matter how carefully stated, no matter how ecumenical and affirming, no matter how polite, shatters at the resurrected body of Jesus. Because to speak of the resurrection of Jesus is no longer religious speech, but speech that challenges reality, reorients how we see earth and sky, water and dirt, land and animals, and even our own bodies. This is speech that evokes a decision: either laugh at it or listen to it, either leave or draw near to this body. It is his body or your stones."[iv]

In making this final statement about God being the God of resurrection, Paul challenges the natural theology that was common among the Greeks and intellectualism. "Appeals to reason and to observation of the natural world can only be taken so far in the proclamation of the gospel."[v] Ultimately, what defines God as God, is that God is capable of doing what nature is not. God is capable of offering more than the human mind can comprehend. God is what humanity cannot fully conceive. Indeed, God offers us proof of our incapacity to comprehend through the resurrection of Christ, declaring that in God's way, life is more powerful than even that which we, as mortals, define as definitive: death.

And this leads me back to our disconnecting and recentering breath.

In the Church, especially here in America, we often get caught up in the societal powers of cultural significance. Like the ancient Greeks, we try to give divine weight to people and material possessions with mortal limitations. We treat individuals, caucuses, and flawed politicians as our saviors. We create ointments, vitamins, and herbal medicines, which offer life-prolonging promises. We prescribe workout regimens, core-strengthening office chairs, and standing desks as physically-curing alternatives. And we

offer that by working harder and working more hours, we can enjoy the fruits of our retirement labor earlier and for longer.

Now hear me, I'm not saying that standing desks, herbal medicines, and trustworthy politicians are not good for the world. I'm not trying to argue that daily vitamins and humble public servants aren't going to offer the community a better quality of life. In fact, Paul isn't making that argument either.

What Paul *is* arguing is that, in the grand scheme of creation, in a world in search of its divine sustainer – there is but one who presents themselves in a way that proves their worth, and that is the one who has given assurance to all by raising Christ from the dead. There is only One who should ever been given the title of "savior." There is only One who should ever be called the "sustainer." There is only One who we should seek to model in our relationships with each other.

The invitation of Paul is to help these Gentiles, the Greeks, the pagan and idol worshippers be drawn into the body of Christ, to be united in one with the Spirit with the people Israel, and to become part of God's beloved community.

That was Paul's invitation to the Athenians, and it is still the invitation of Paul to those who read his words today. Even though we might use the right names on our signs, even though we might know that the "unknown" God is present in the person of Jesus, it doesn't appear that society-wide Paul would be any more pleased with our religious presence today than he was with the religious pluralism of the Greeks in the first century. And perhaps Paul's words might seem as abrasive to us today as they did to those in the Areopagus.

No matter how many crosses we create out of gold and silver, no matter how many signs we hang on the interstate light poles, no matter how many portraits we paint to honor our beloved white jesus, "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." We need to disconnect, and we need to recenter ourselves in the promise of God as the one who brings new life. We need claim and to proclaim that our God is the God of resurrection, and that no human or human-created substitute is worthy of our worship.

So let us take a breath … go ahead, breathe in … and exhale.

Do it again, breath in … and exhale. May every breath we take remind us that our God is the God of resurrection, the God of new life, the God who stands up against the powers of empire. The God who creates, redeems, and sustains. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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[i] Katherine Shaner. "Commentary on Acts 17:22-31." May 15, 2022 http://workingpreacher.org. Retrieved March 20, 2023.
[ii] William H. Willimon. *Acts: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
[iii] Michael Joseph Brown. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2.* Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
[iv] Willie James Jennings. Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.
[v] Willimon.