

“Life in the Spirit: The Power of Testimony”

Acts 17:16-32

May 2, 2021

There is a timeliness and a timelessness to the Gospel. The message we have to offer the world is both eternal and adaptable. We who tell and live this story of transcendence must do so in ways that affirm its relevance. This is true not only for practical reasons—the effectiveness of our ministry and mission—but also for theological reasons. The Gospel is a story of incarnation. The eternal God took on human flesh and became part of the temporal world. This central divine act must have implications for those who bear the name *Christian*. The story we tell takes shape in the words and lives of those who tell it *and* in the places where it is told. From the earliest accounts of Christian proclamation, this has been the case.

The Apostle Paul found himself in the classic city, the hometown of Athena, goddess of wisdom. Athens was the center of philosophical debate and high-minded rhetoric in the ancient world. Well-educated citizens crowded the city square and debated one another about what made for the good life. The city was filled with dozens of temples to different deities and their devoted disciples. And they were always on the lookout for a new perspective, a new teaching, a new god. After preaching in the synagogue and debating the philosophers, Paul is invited to speak at the Areopagus, the most public pulpit in all of Athens. It is a tremendous opportunity for any preacher to address a large crowd of influential thinkers.

What would he say? How would he express what mattered most and move the masses in a meaningful way? Well, flattery is always a good way to begin a sermon: “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Paul praises the Athenians for their spiritual seeking. He uses language and themes that

would resonate with his audience, quoting two Greek poets for emphasis and common ground. Pointing to an altar honoring an unknown god, he introduces the Athenians to the God he knows. The creator of all that exists, the name above every name, the all-powerful and only God. Using the language of Greek poetry, Paul explains that this is the God to whom we belong (we too are his offspring), in whom we live and move and have our being. Passionately, he proclaims that the one true God cannot be cast in gold or silver and cannot be confined in shrines of our design. This God, our God, is dynamic, active, and on the move. Finally, Paul turns from a sweeping summary of common conviction to the scandal of his message—this God has entered into the human story in a very particular way. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have definitively disclosed God’s will for the world.

What Paul offers that day in Athens is the message he received on the road to Damascus. Before that trip, Paul too was extremely religious, zealously persecuting those who violated the purity of his tradition. But Paul’s mind, heart, and life have been changed. He is compelled to tell others about the God in whom he has come to believe. And so, in this powerful and public way, he shares his *testimony* with the Athenians.

I’ve been thinking, as I’ve prepared this sermon, about the power of testimony and the centrality of story to the movement of our faith. I’ve been thinking about how Paul’s speech on Mars Hill conveys conviction in God who is both transcendent and relevant, far beyond us and right here with us.

Several years ago, as part of a series of conversations with leaders of other faith traditions,

I had the opportunity to welcome the Rabbi of a local synagogue to speak to a congregation of Presbyterians. We had asked Rabbi Segal to address this question: what is the central issue facing the faith community today, and what perspective does your religious tradition offer in responding to it? For Rabbi Segal, the central issue was not the one of orthodoxy (right belief), or orthopraxy (right action) but of relevance. What relevant message does the faith community have in our time? Segal explained that a century ago the church and the synagogue were relevant because they held intrinsic, unquestioned authority. Authority grants relevance by definition. But today, he explains, because of changes in the way our culture grants authority, the order is reversed. In order to gain authority, the synagogue and the church must seek relevance; relevance in the lives of its members and relevance to the broader life of its community.

As one without authority, Paul stands before the Athenians to testify. It is his insistence on relevance that opens the door to transformation—grounding his proclamation in the lived experience of his audience *and* his own story.

Can Paul's example instruct a contemporary congregation charged with embodying the Gospel in a very different time and place? It won't surprise you to learn that I think it can.

Let's begin with this. Relevant proclamation and faithful engagement are essential to the life of any congregation that is to be a vibrant witness to the Gospel. *And* Rabbi Segal was spot-on in his description of the reality that we face. It is true that some congregations and Christian movements continue to cling to the perception of authority that in fact disappeared decades ago. They do so by becoming ever more ideologically extreme, ultimately indistinguishable from a partisan political agenda that only takes advantage of that remaining shred of authority and then discards the essence of the message with ease. This grasping at influence only hastens our decline by abandoning the integrity of the Gospel.

In other cases relevance is sought through dismissal of *any* core message that might challenge assumptions, relying instead on human connection and consumerist approach. Allergic to the risk of rejection that accompanies Gospel proclamation, these communities instead emphasize self-improvement or societal change without theological content. Certainly, these are compelling projects, but I confess to a discomfort with the dilution of deep meaning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who gave his life for Christian witness against the rise of Nazism, wrote that when Christ calls us, he calls us to come and die. I wonder what he would make of movements that suggest Christ calls us to come on and get happy... fit...or rich.

I began this sermon by saying that the proclamation of a gospel that is transcendent *and* relevant has both practical and theological value. I believe I can best describe this using the community we know best—ours. I firmly believe that Second Presbyterian thrives as a congregation and impacts the world beyond most when we proclaim the majesty and wonder of God and God's call for active and transformative faith right here and now. I believe we have theological integrity when we preach *not* that the Christian faith is simple to understand or easy to live, but that it is worth the effort. As those who believe in a God who took on human flesh, we roll up our sleeves to make a difference in the world God longs to redeem. As those who trust that God's final word is not death but resurrection life, we proclaim a hope that is not captive to human understanding. We tell the story. We live the story. We offer testimony.

This might be what is most missing from conversations about faith in our time and place—the authenticity and vulnerability of testimony. Instead, we tend to skate on the surface of faith, offering empty platitudes that fail to touch the depth of our soul's experience or information *about* God rather than an encounter *with* God. I think testimony, sacred storytelling, offers a pathway to deeper

meaning and more profound faith.

Do you lament the thin and coercive messages that dominate the religious landscape? Would you agree that the flood of empty religious language leaves a drought of meaning, weightiness, and significance?

Like Paul in Athens, I believe that we live in a time of great opportunity for the community of faith. I see people searching for meaning. We have a responsibility to be relevant; a call to share a message of hope and grace; a call to counter the voices of judgment and division that offer no compelling witness in Athens or Indianapolis. How do we do that? Not with slogans and buzzwords; not with a shameful apology or embarrassed retreat; not with partisan pronouncements or ideological litmus tests. We do it with testimony. We tell the stories of our divine encounters, where God met and transformed us. Testimony answers the deep question—is God still active in the world...in the church...in my life?

As people of the Christian faith, we must speak of God through our own stories of encounter. You see, the sacred and beautiful stories of how we come to faith are wonderfully unique and deeply personal—they cannot be forced into a box or entered on a form. Some in worship this morning could tell about a life-changing, dramatic, flash-of-light experience that transformed your lives and altered your path forever. Some of you would describe your path to faith as a gradually unfolding journey, a series of confirming experiences that have led you to a place of conviction. Some of you would tell a different story—perhaps you were raised in a faith community, appreciated the love and nurture you received there but found yourselves wandering away from that faith, searching for something else. You might describe our path as a journey back home. Others in worship this morning are what I call “church survivors.” You are here despite some painful experience of exclusion, some harsh message of judgment. Faith for you might be a journey of recovery from abuse, a journey toward acceptance. Whatever story you have to tell, it offers a window into the reality of God’s continuing presence in the world. You must tell it.

And we, as a community of faith and friendship, must be a people of testimony. We have a unique and inspiring story to tell. In this difficult and trying year, our life together has been strengthened, the reach of our worship and programming has expanded, our care for one another has deepened, our outreach to the community has grown exponentially, our avenues of connection have broadened, the scope of our influence has widened. Don’t you think Second’s story needs to be heard? It is through the sovereign grace and blessing of God that we have been given this opportunity—we must tell God’s story here.

You may have noticed that Paul’s encounter in Athens ends with an intriguing and hopeful phrase. Those who do not mock Paul’s proclamation leave him with these words: “We will hear you again about this.” Another opportunity to give testimony. Another chance to offer a word of hope shared in the power of story.

The Jesuit priest and mystic Anthony de Mello used to tell a story about a group of disciples gathered around their master, asking him endless questions about God. Finally, the master said that anything we say about God is just words because God is unknowable. One disciple asked, “Then why do you speak of him at all?” and the master replied, “Why does the bird sing? She sings not because she has a statement but because she has a song.”

Second, we have a song to sing, a story to tell, a testimony to share.

The world will hear from us again. Amen.