

## *How will they know we are Christian?*

### *Acts 17: 16-31 Paul in Athens is distressed*

So Paul had a message for the people of Athens; a message that he wanted them to hear, a message he tried to share in a way that they would hear it. When Paul entered Athens he first noticed that the people were deeply religious yet he questioned what it was they were worshipping. As he walked through Athens he noticed an altar with an inscription on it that said “to an unknown God”. This concerned him, we heard, deeply for it led to the discovery that the city was full of idols, but Paul saw this as an opportunity, a calling, to share with them who this unknown God was for him according to what he himself had experienced. He was going to witness to the people of Athens the good news of Christ. Paul felt compelled to speak with them directly, so he argued and debated with the people. He employed techniques of midrash which is how Jewish people would deepen their faith and widen their understanding of who God was and what God was calling them to do and be. Now Paul’s message we’ve heard wasn’t totally well received. Paul was looked at as somebody who was babbling. The people of Athens didn’t particularly respect him, nor did they pay him a lot of attention. When he spoke I imagine them hearing the sound of “wah wah wah wah wah wah”, kind of like sound of the characters in Charlie Brown.

Now Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and is also attributed to writing the book of Acts puts Paul in this moment in these scriptures, in a sort of trial, with no court in session. Paul the apostle is sent into what some might consider to be an unmarketable place, maybe a bit of a hostile territory of sorts, but Paul is to testify to the people of Athens in this marketplace and try to get them to hear and understand the good news of Jesus Christ. And if they do and if they follow Jesus’ teachings, they like he, will have their lives transformed. His message is this, that this unknown God that they have been worshipping through idols is the one true God. He tells them that God does not live in shrines of things made by human hands, he tells them that God does not need human hands for anything and that he believes that God will be found in people, in each one of us. He says, ‘for in God we live and move and have our being’. He believes that if we place Christ at the centre of human aspiration, it leads to the witness of how God provides us with true security in this world. The resurrection of Christ meant that God is now with us, is experienced through us and through others as it says in our Creed, not in objects and not in idols. No longer do we need someone else to give us access to God. When we believe in God, we live,

move and have our being in God, therefore God is with us and we are not alone. So it's time for us to see the truth and to deepen our own understanding.

Paul states, "Since we are God's offspring, we do not need to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals, while God has overlooked the times of human ignorance now he commands all people everywhere to repent. John McClure a theologian suggests that "our culture, like Athens, is a culture of many idols, consumer goods, military power, sex and technology, just to name a few."<sup>1</sup> I think we can all agree that the internet or technology is definitely something that we witness people worshipping every day. I am sharing that I was even in the waiting room, waiting for my surrogate grandchild yesterday and everyone there from two different families, every single one of them were sitting on their phones and looking through pictures and showing them, but not talking with each other. The internet provides us with any information we want. It provides us with an instant connection to knowledge and current events. In fact it kind of replaces the whole eldership in our culture where we rely on people who have gone before us to share their wisdom and their history and remembrance of what has happened and how that might affect the future, but like the Athenians we spend most of our time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. What the internet doesn't provide us with though is true experience.

Before I go on I must acknowledge that, like all things, technology isn't all bad. It's both a blessing and a curse like many things in this world. Paul wanted people to experience the divine, to feel the transforming power of God in their daily lives. Worshipping objects, like worshipping technology, does not provide us with human contact or connection. Isolation still remains one of the leading causes, in our society, of mental health issues, addictions, and I think it even contributes to the number of violent acts in our world. I was reading a blog the other day, ironically on the internet, and it said, 'loneliness is involuntary solitude...we are alone together'. That stuck with me. There are people who enjoy getting time to themselves. After Sunday it's my favorite thing, being by myself for a little bit after being with so many amazing people, but that's by choice. When people are isolated in their homes it's an involuntary solitude. Friends we seek meaning in the connection often through the internet, but I haven't found those experiences to truly resolve loneliness. Paul believes that once we repent of our human ignorance and come to know God we will never be alone again, for when we believe in God we live and have our being.

So what does this have to do with the "Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri"; the movie that I suggested we reflect on today? A movie that I think is very powerful and won some Oscar awards. This movie leads us through an exploration of repentance, forgiveness, sin, the act of witness, the desire for revenge and the desire for justice and redemption. Like Paul, Mildred, who is the main character of the movie, a mother in Ebbing, Missouri publicly challenges the local authorities to stop ignoring the signs and to get up off their butts and to seek justice for the

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<sup>1</sup> John McClure, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, p. 473.

death of her daughter. She calls the community out on their apparent apathy. The movie begins with her driving down a deserted road and noticing something just like Paul did when he went into Athens. And what she noticed were three empty, dilapidated billboards. It was in that moment that she comes up with a way of getting her message out there in a non-violent way. The message on the three billboards are revealed in reverse order; the first one says "How come Chief Willoughby?" the second one says, "and still no arrest." third one, "Raped while dying." If you were to drive down the road and see those billboards it would say, "Raped while dying", "and still no arrest", "How come Chief Willoughby?" Mildred found a way to stir up what was going on in that community, to stir up authorities and people to actually deal with the pain when that community was suffering. She, like Paul, chooses to boldly share her message even in the face of persecution, ridicule and all sorts of other stuff. It's not received with enthusiasm and it sets off a series of events, a series of actions which have repercussions. What I found so interesting about this movie was that she puts up these billboards and questions the Chief because she believes that the buck stops at him even though he is not really the one responsible for this and in the end he flips it back at her. It turns out he is dying of cancer and on his deathbed he writes some letters and in the letter he pays for the billboards so that even after he is gone she is going to have to deal with the outcome of what she put up on these billboards. Just one example of how one action leads to another. And Chief Willoughby really tried to seek justice, but sometimes justice isn't there. Sometimes we have to wait for justice to come.

In those moments we also see another police officer who is questionable and has obviously had a hard life and was raised in a certain way where he saw people as objects. This person was black, this person was this, this person was that and because of that he pre-judged and treated them horribly. He got so mad at the guy that sold the billboards to Mildred he ends up pushing him out of a window. This person is hurt and in hospital and later in the movie the same guy who pushed the guy out the window ends up getting burned in a fire, ends up in a hospital room, the same room as the guy that he hurt and in that moment when they realize who's who, because they are all bandaged, it's a powerful moment of forgiveness, a powerful moment of repentance. And the person that he hurt actually offers him hospitality. It's a beautiful and painful moment. I wanted to start today by greeting you with the words, good morning to all of my friends and all of my enemies. Each one of us has people who we have hurt and who have hurt us and we have to find a way to act as Jesus would where we treat one another with grace, forgiveness and with unconditional love. People will know that we are Christians when we share that unconditional love with one another, when we find a way to ask for forgiveness, when we realize how our actions can impact others. And in this small community we will see relationship after relationship affecting one another; some that stand with Mildred because they have been persecuted. They find a way, even though they are getting hurt to support her. She has been divorced by her husband. Her husband is the one that ends up burning down the billboards. It makes you wonder, can anything ever be resolved? Will we ever find a way to stop worshipping false idols and instead find a way to learn to love our enemies as ourselves; to learn to love ourselves as much as our friends. People will know we are Christian when we show compassion

to our enemies, they will know we are Christian when we challenge injustice and take risks and proclaim the difficult messages that society often doesn't want to hear. When we place God at the centre, when we place Jesus at the centre of our lives we will find a way, we will find the courage to stand up for what we know is true. When we stop solely relying on the internet for our knowledge, when we stop worshipping these idols we will find fulfillment, relationship and connection with others. This will bring meaning to our lives, this will bring a sense of new life and this is what will transform our lives. When we look at one another in the eyes, share our stories and share those moments of transformation with each other. It's only then that things can change. As we have seen all of these tragedies lately with Toronto, Humboldt; some that are violent, some that are accidents. What has been most powerful in those tragic moments is the people coming together in prayer from different faith traditions, is the people embracing one another, stranger and friend, comforting one another and going out of their way to care for the people that have been hurt. The outpouring of love is what brings me hope.

The end of the movie, you see the officer who pushed the guy out of the window and Mildred in a care together trying to seek their own justice and we are left wondering whether they will go through with it or not. My hope and my belief is that their hearts were opened just like Paul did with the Athenians; opened their hearts to new possibilities to a new way of being and treating one another. So people go out and share the good news, proclaim it boldly and make sure you're focussed with God as your heart, with Jesus' teachings before you so that we can be transforming energy in this world to bring about peace and harmony. For this we give God thanks, Amen.