

Acts 17:22-28

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The 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, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor* he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God* and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

The Way (My Way or the Highway)
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Last week I began this series by asking some questions about the future of the church. That's what this series is about – the future of the church. I don't know what the future of the church is, but nearly all conversations about the church somehow end up being about the future of the church, and so I decided to do a series on the future of the church – based on the history of the church, and a little prophecy for the church from contemporary literature.

As most of you know I went to the Festival of the Homiletics last month, and of course the big topic, was the future of the church. The theme of the event was "Preaching on the Borders," and it was my first-ever Festival of the Homiletics.

FOH is one big preaching party featuring dozens of "Very Important Preachers" who preach to thousands of "Less Important Preachers" about preaching.

I was really looking forward to going to this event; I had heard how great it is, and how it's the preaching event of the year, and I have to admit I was a little star-struck.

But with airfare and hotel it was pretty costly, so in order to make it fit within my continuing education budget, I got a cheap hotel on the edge of town, and hired an Uber car every day to take me to the main attraction.

And you know what?
Every day I became a little more disenchanted.

I was disenchanted by the celebrity preachers who said the same things on stage that they say in their books and blogs.

The ones on the stage are the big names in the world of progressive church leaders. They are there to draw a crowd.

And so they did...

Eighteen hundred people attended.

Which led me to be disenchanted by the consumerism going on downstairs where dozens of vendors were selling designer religious gear and books written by all the celebrity preachers upstairs.

I was disenchanted by eighteen hundred preachers dining and shopping on the Riverwalk, which is really is very lovely, but lovely isn't the point – the point is to sell stuff.

I was disenchanted that most of the preachers stayed right in the heart of it all, at one of the six luxury hotels.

The whole affair was pretty high-class – especially for a preaching event that was about preaching on the borders.

Borders in this context means the fringes of society – it means the forgotten, the ignored, the exploited, the abused, anyone who needs----

That's where Jesus went, the celebrity preachers told us. That's where he comforted, healed, loved and taught the people who society ignored.

And they told us that in this changing church climate, it is more important than ever that we locate ourselves on the borders and actively involve ourselves in the lives of others –
Because in this day and age, people no longer come to us; we have to go to them— just like Jesus did.

And then everyone clapped.

Each day I would go back to my hotel on the outskirts of town where the highway overpass was almost close enough to hit with a rock. I met my neighbor on the last day while I waited for my Uber ride to the airport.

He was Latino and he was waiting for some people to come and buy some stolen speakers from him.

He told me this and a whole lot more in the five minutes we stood there talking. I wished him luck as I climbed into my Uber.

My Uber driver was a Latino woman about my age. Inevitably the question was asked – why was I in town, which ultimately led to the revelation of my vocation.

That changed everything.

We had about a 45 minute ride to the airport, and my driver unburdened herself.

We will never meet again –

I'm a pastor –

It was safe.

There are some preachers who would groan and roll their eyes as they tell this story. I felt it to be an honor. And what I learned that day is that if we're going to go to the borders, it shouldn't be to preach; it should be to listen.

So often I'll hear people yearning for a return to The Way of Jesus. And I believe there's a general understanding of what is meant by that – a return to his way of hanging out on the margins and loving the forgotten. In other words, going to the borders.

That's what we yearn for, The Way of Jesus, but most of the time we don't even come close, and we know it. Most of us are so far removed from the margins, that it feels like our American lifestyle is nothing more than a buffer zone from reality.

And it's discouraging.

But then there are those times we get it right. Super right. Sometimes we'll just shine. And we'll wonder, "Where the heck did that come from?" All of us; it happens to all of us, not just the celebrities who know how to clarify it for the rest of us.

Despite all my misgivings about large preaching parties, this is my church, and I love it with all my heart. The people of the church are my people, and I know that we are all of us, each and every one, sincerely seeking the way of Jesus.

Sometimes we blunder pretty badly, but we don't give up – we seek to follow his way – the way that leads us to God.

But what is this “Way,” anyway, and why are we feeling its pull? Do we believe that it will lead us to paradise where everything is perfect? Jesus talked about a peaceful world where the lion and the lamb lay down together, but for him, The Way led to the cross – and for those who followed directly behind him it led to persecution, torture, beatings and death.

What kind of a way is that?

In today's reading we meet a very earnest follower of the Way.

To the modern reader, Paul is a major celebrity preacher who was responsible for bringing Christianity to the Western world.

But Paul himself would be very surprised to learn of his fame. Because while his days were spent recruiting and nurturing new followers, he had to balance that against running from lynch mobs.

Today's story places him in Athens.

Why is Paul in Athens?

Because people are gunning for him in Thessalonica, and he's cooling his heels in Athens until Silas and Timothy can catch up with him.

The Way for Paul was treacherous. His job was to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul had the absolute worst job in the whole church, but that was how he perceived his calling. And while he may have been a bit of a jerk from time to time, he never wavered in his commitment.

Athens was the hub of culture; it was the learning capital of the world. It was the city of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and many more great minds.

There were many schools of thought running through Athens, but they all had one thing in common, and that was a razor sharp focus on the role of logic, inquiry and reason, and the supremacy of human intellect.

So before he could even shake the dew from his cloak, Paul began evangelizing in Athens, where he found himself before two famous groups of philosophers known as the Stoics and the Epicureans.

These guys disagreed on everything.

Except for one thing.

They agreed that “pleasure” was the supreme good of life.

In fact, it was **The** leading lady of *all* philosophical thought in the Greco-Roman world.

We’re not really aware of just how infiltrated we are by ancient Greek philosophy, but it’s had an enormous amount of influence on human thought – and at the heart of it all, lies nothing more than the pursuit of happiness.

Greek philosophy permeates everything.

Nearly the entire Christian movement is shaped by it.

It informs the New Testament.

Even the term “Christian” is a Greek term that means “Like The Anointed” or “Follower of The Anointed.”

And I think that’s extremely important to the topic at hand.

I have been using Huxley’s book *Brave New World* to add another lane to the conversation, because of our movement away from organized religion, and what that looked like in Huxley’s imaginary future 500 years from now.

I first read *BNW* 20 years ago, and it was eye-opening then, but now it’s getting kind of weird. Because we seem to be moving into that imaginary future, and what makes it even weirder is that we are 500 years too early.

In 1932 Aldous Huxley wrote *BNW* to demonstrate the degrading bondage into which we can be brought by our own desire for pleasure. His point was that when we are anesthetized by pleasures and entertainments, trivialities and distractions, we can become habituated to the steady erosion of our humanity.

And so here’s what’s really interesting — *Brave New World* is the modern equivalent to the “city in speech” built by Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*. *Brave New*

World is not a new world at all. It's an old world that's been going on since the earliest philosophers. In Huxley's world, the pursuit of pleasure and happiness is the purpose and meaning of life, but this pursuit stems all the way back to the earliest philosophers, including, and especially, the Stoics and the Epicureans that Paul preached to at the Areopagus.

Who would have thought it goes back a really long way, and who would have thought to look under Greek Philosophy? They told us it was original sin and that we are damaged, broken creatures.

Turns out we're just habituated.

So we preach about preaching on the borders without grasping the irony of our expensive hotel rooms.

But still, we're reaching. We're reaching for the Way of Jesus, each of us, in our own way, and at our own pace. And I think maybe that's where part of this whole thing lands. Somewhere between logic and reason, pleasure and happiness, and meaning and faith.

Somewhere in between where a mystical rabbi from Galilee is able to break in and say "Come and see," and people still drop everything to follow.

I believe it.

I know it.

I've experienced it.

And yes, it involves going to the borders.

How can something be quiet and loud at the same time? I don't know, but that's how it is. He calls us, and we can't help but hear that he's inviting us to a new way of being in the world. A way that calls for self-emptying love instead of the shallow pursuit of pleasure. A way that calls for serving others, and humbling oneself, which sounds absolutely crazy, but as it turns out it's the only way out of habituation and into life.

And it's not just the Jesus way, it's the way – the way of all our ancient wisdom teachings – all accumulated on one stone tablet that says: “love God and love each other.” It is the way that is written in the wind and etched on the moon. It whirls with the Dervishes and it bows with the Buddhist Monks. It is the Way of being awake in the world and accepting that there will be some bad days, but even the worst day is better than being asleep in our own lives. It is both The Way, and it is the Way of Jesus.

Jesus might not be the only Way, but he is the one who showed up willing to show us The Way and walk with us along The Way and guide us until we're home safe and sound. And as long as we keep our eyes on him, the future of the church is secure. Amen