

Acts 17

Paul arrives in Athens and there is a problem, a big one. The city is full of idols.

If he came to our city, would he notice the same problem? Athens has its temples to other gods. Does our city have the same? I think it does.

Now I think it is obvious for us to think of the temple with an angel on the top of it. But if you will allow me to allegorize a bit, I wonder if there are other temples in town that tempt us with their worship? Maybe it's the one with the big vault full of money in it – we worship there ever? Maybe the one with the liquids inside, or the trucks outside. Or maybe it's closer – our own homes, screens, minds. I don't know.

Allegory or not, we might look back to Acts and wonder, “ok, well, what is the solution to this problem?”

I suppose it can't be a horrible idea to do what Paul did. And what did he do? “Paul reasoned and conversed every day.”

Reasoning. How is that for a solution!

God gave you that mind, now he expects you to use it – not worship it, but use it.

And so when doubts and fears and other gods come forth. What should you do? Think about that god. Can it save? What does it promise? What does it demand of you? Is it real? How do you know?

These are the things Paul considers as he speaks with the Athenians. In conversation. You cannot reason with someone if there is no conversation. That goes for yourself too. If you are so full of distraction, how can you meditate on things eternal? And I know it can be scary to delve into those existential waters, but you don't have to go alone – bring a friend, or a pastor. But you have to keep the conversations going. You cannot distract yourself from mortality, regret, and deep meaning forever. The time to think through those things is now. “What do we believe? what evidence do we have?” And you may be surprised: Maybe priorities shift, maybe there is some meaning, and dare I say: hope?

But aside from talking to ourselves. Paul is clearly talking with other people, who do not believe in God. And I might say the premise is quite similar. You have to keep the conversation going. There is no reasoning with an unbeliever if you shut down the conversation. If you cut that person out of your life. If you don't see them as worthy of a conversation, or able to darken the doors. If you are so rude, mean, or jerkish to them that they walk away, well, what conversing is going on then?

Westboro Baptist church's signs that say “God hates gays” are not only inaccurate (to use a fairly well known, but generally helpful phrase: God hates sin yes, but not

the sinners – he died for them). So not only are they wrong, but they also shut down any conversation, not to mention, give ammunition to those who think the Church is full of judgmental hateful people.

Paul, conversed. He reasoned. He kept the conversation going. So, who do you converse with? And is there an opportunity there to reason with them? I bet there are opportunities.

The question then I suppose is – “well how do I reason?” I jump to our epistle reading. “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”

First, Notice in this verse it is them asking YOU about the hope in you. Do you have to barge into the breakroom, lock the door, and get the bullhorn out? No. You converse. In real relationships. Now, to be fair, are there intentional ways we can try to establish those relationships? Sure. So we knock on a few doors, we host some events, we have a school. But in your relationships people will ask, and what a beautiful opportunity to tell – and you don’t even feel like a salesman when they ask.

Second, notice *why* they ask. Because they see Hope in you. They see, in you, someone different than the world that rages, full of bitterness and greed, with no peace. Which brings us back to that conversation with yourself and the things

eternal. Do you have hope in you? Or is it just bitterness, lust, and despair? Then it's time for you to have a talk. It's time for you to find the fountain and source of all goodness in a Savior who is real and who is really yours. Which isn't to say, "If you are a good Christian you won't struggle with depression or sin or doubt." It is to say that in the wind and waves of life you have an anchor- Jesus! And people, who are also out in the wind and waves, will notice that you have an anchor, and they just might ask about it.

THEN we are told to be prepared. So, Christian at HOPE Lutheran, do you have hope? Do you know where it is found? In Jesus? Good. Then, are you prepared? I think every Christians should have a 30 second to two minute spiel (testimony) ready for when someone asks. And forgive me if you have heard me harp on this before. But I think Peter agrees with me.

My spiel, because I am a cynic, tempted by naturalism, has to do with the creation of matter, the conservation of mass, and proofs of the resurrection. That's my testimony because it is what is honestly compelling to me when I have doubts. So I don't feel like a salesman when I say, "Yes, person in the elevator, I do know someone made all this, I do think someone beat death, and that means I will someday and so I have some hope." Boom.

But your spiel doesn't have to be the same as mine. In fact, it probably shouldn't be. We aren't making salespeople here – “Here is your company line, say it.” No. You have hope in Jesus. For a number of probably different compelling reasons than me. So share those. A man at Crown of Life gave me his testimony: he said he was so lonely. So lonely. Until he heard about Jesus who was with him always. And that gives him hope. It's so different than mine, but so beautiful. And I know there are people out there that will resonate with his testimony more than mine, and God will bring them to him.

I will say, if we glance back at our text, that Paul does argue based on creation and resurrection. I think those are probably helpful things to touch on. You should probably mention Jesus – since he is the bedrock of our hope, no? So I think those aren't bad places to start if you are struggling here.

But whatever compelling reasons give you hope: One final point on all this. Note that Peter says to do this with gentleness and respect. Because you can be right, and still be a jerk. Paul says “speak the truth in love.” So you have it from two different apostles. Don't shirk the truth, don't back down, but seek to speak with that other person as if Jesus loves them enough to die for them, because guess what, he does.

And if that is intimidating. Well, consider and remember that he loves you enough to die for you too. Even if you do stick your foot in your mouth, or you are a little bit of a coward at times, or if you have your own doubts, fears, and sins at times. Go back to your hope: Jesus. And then perhaps see how God can use you to share his Word.

There is a big theological conversation in the background of “sharing the good news.” And I’m too nerdy to ignore it – it is the battle between God’s election, which is a scriptural teaching, and the fact that God uses means to accomplish his will. If God knows his elect, then why evangelize? He’ll work it out, and he doesn’t NEED us. True enough. But God works through means: will he use books, words, mothers, fathers, friends, neighbors, water, bread and wine. What about you?

Where do you fit into it? Do you fit in as a guilty “Ugh, I HAVE TO TELL the story or else!” Or do you fit in as, “I get to tell a story, because it has been so good to me?”

And if your thought is, “Ugh I don’t want to...” Then guess what, you need more of the story for you. For it is an honor to speak the Word of the King, to be his doorkeeper. “Here am I, send me,” God’s people have said throughout time, and God has used them for his elective means.

Pr. Pauls from Boise used the illustration of a grandparent who doesn't get up going, "Ugh I guess I have to show that picture of my grandchild today at an inappropriate time to everyone I meet." No, the grandparent shows that picture at all those times because they are so overjoyed and proud of their perfect grandchild. He then pulled out of the pulpit a big picture of his grandchild to show us.

You have a risen King. Who gives life. Who does not scream at you for not meeting your quota. Though there is a parable about a coin – should we bury it? Well, that would be like having a grandchild you are ashamed of. What a tragedy for whatever reason. We have a King, are we ashamed of him?

Is he ashamed of you?

I don't think so. "I will not leave you as orphans." He promised us today. He has made you. He has claimed you as his own through the Spirit, Word, and/or water. He has given his whole life for you. He knows what it is like to stand for the truth and be beaten for it. He knows what it is like to seek to save but to be labelled the "bad guy" for it. He knows what it is like to be slandered, ashamed, rejected, betrayed. He knows quite well what pain and wrath and judgment are. He knows what death is. And he did it for you. And you aren't loved?

Even more our king has overcome every one of those things and has promised his children will overcome them as well. He tells us today, "because I live, you also

will live.” And we are worried about our problems and the news? We are afraid of death? No, no, no. The Lord is risen, he reigns, he has made you his own. You are a people of Hope. Rejoice. And if someone asks about your hope – tell ‘em. What do you have to lose? Jesus has given you the kingdom.