

Rev. Lisa Schrott
February 4, 2024
Acts 17: 16-27
We Make Room: Open for Questions

The last two weeks we have been traveling with the apostles as they seek bring the word of God to people outside of the religious traditions associated with Judaism. Scholars often divide Paul travels into three journeys. The first was to Cyprus and portions of what was known as Asia Minor, now known as Turkey. In this journey, Paul often wrote about the struggles of welcoming non-Jewish believers of Christ into the fold, how to handle the issues of circumcision and dietary laws. The second and third set of travels occur after these issues have been settled by the Council in Jerusalem, the text I shared two weeks ago. Gentiles - that is non-Jews - are welcomed into the fold. Paul now addresses how to be a follower of Christ while living in a world where the person and work of Jesus Christ is barely known, if known at all. Last week Rebecca shared how a group women were invited to be part of the community of faith, and how one woman Lydia, a seller of purple cloth became the founder of the church in Philippi. We continue on that journey this morning as Paul is in Athens.

Before we delve into Paul's Athenian adventure, it may be helpful to see where Paul has most recently been. Upon finishing his work in Philippi he heads further into Greece to Thessalonica and Berea. Yet not all is hunky dory for Paul. He encounters significant challenges from some of the Jewish leaders as he is sharing the message of Christ, so much so that friends whisked him away to Athens, leaving his traveling companions Silas and Timothy behind.

Paul needs a break! As I shared in the Children's Message, life has been very chaotic for Paul and he stops for a breath. To get his legs under him, while he is waiting for Silas and Timothy to show up, Paul explores Athens. He takes in the sites – lots of good Insta worthy spots in Athens – visiting the various temples and shrines. We pick up Paul's story here in chapter 17 verse 16:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jewish leaders and the devout persons and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this pretentious babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took Paul and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual 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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, this one who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor God made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

You may have seen or heard the headlines in the last two weeks. On January 24, the Pew Research Center released the latest report on the “nones”. “Nones” in this context are not female Roman Catholic religious leaders, rather those who answer “none” when asked about their religion. They are a diverse group, encompassing those who describe “themselves as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular.”¹ “Nones” make up approximately 28% of the US adult population, almost double the percentage of people who belong to Mainline Protestant denominations, which includes many branches of the Presbyterian, Reformed, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, UCC and Christian Church Disciples of Christ denominations.

The Pew Center research delves into questions about why the “nones” are self-described as non-religious, and about other attributes such as their civic engagement, their views on science, morality, and spirituality in general. I encourage you check out the report online – search “Pew Center 2024 Nones” - as there are a lot of interesting data in the report. For this morning, I want to highlight three statistics that I think the Apostle Paul would appreciate after his sojourn to Athens:

- 1) The reason “nones” give most often for not having a religion is that they question religious teachings: 60% say their **doubt** about religious teachings is an extremely or very important reason why they are nonreligious.²
- 2) Most religious “nones” express a mix of positive and negative opinions about religion’s impact on people’s lives and on society as a whole. For example, while 80% agree with the statement: “Religion causes division and intolerance”, most “nones” also agree with the statements – “Religion helps society by giving people meaning and purpose in their lives”, and that religion “encourages people to do the right thing and treat other people well.”³
- 3) Compared with U.S. adults who identify with a religion, “nones” have a more positive view of science. At the same time, most “nones” say that there are some things science

¹ Gregory A. Smith, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, Michael Rotolo, Asta Kallo and Becka A. Alper. Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe. *Pew Center Reports*. Available online at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/why-are-nones-nonreligious/>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/are-nones-hostile-toward-religion/>

cannot explain, and that there's something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it.⁴

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "From one ancestor God made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us."

So here we have Paul, standing on an outcropping of rocks overlooking Athens, with all manners of people listening intently. While Rome may have been the seat of imperial power at this time, and Corinth the political and commercial capital of the region we now know of as Greece, Athens was the center of Western art, philosophy and culture. As we hear in verse 20: The philosophers were curious about Paul's teaching, wanting to know more, saying "It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." And Paul meets the people where they are.

As New Testament Professor Bridgett Green writes, "Paul's approach in proclaiming the gospel to the Athenians is a testament to God's expansive plan. With an ethnographer's curiosity, he strives to connect with the community he visits, even in spaces of discomfort. Without condescension or berating, he uses a rhetorical strategy that resonates with the audience and respects their culture. While Paul's mission is to introduce the gospel of Jesus and to transform lives, his goal is to persuade. Despite disagreeing with what he observes, he is neither dismissive nor patronizing."⁵

Neither dismissive nor patronizing. For as much grief as Paul sometimes gets, in the Book of Acts we see Paul model for us how to share the Gospel message with those who are curious, and have doubts. The self-identified "Nones" in the Pew Center survey may have doubts because they were raised in a society, like the Athenians, where there was simply little if any exposure to stories that shape our identity as Christ-followers. It would sound rather strange to their ears, especially since we too often default to church-speak and short-hand, assuming that everyone knows the who, what, where, why and how of being part of a faith community.

Thinking back to the "Nones" that the Pew Center reports on, maybe they have doubts because they have been exposed to a Gospel message that is heavy on condemnation and judgement, and light on grace and mutual love and respect. Maybe their experiences with religious people has been one where certainty about one's beliefs, values and personal salvation are the marks of a true person of faith, whereas honest searching for meaning in a pluralistic world is dismissed. Maybe their experience with religious institutions or people has

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/how-do-nones-view-science/>

⁵ Bridgett Green. Acts 17:22-31. Connecting to the Word. *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship.* Westminster John Knox Press, 2019; p275.

been one where questions are not welcome, especially questions about how we understand scripture given its historic context and variety of literary styles.

And it is not just the “nones” who have doubts. Many of us who were raised in faith traditions or maybe who have dabbled in faith circles or have even been part of churches throughout our whole lives have questions and doubts. I believe that these questions and doubts should be celebrated rather than dismissed or worse, frowned on. I believe that church needs to meet people where they are, not superimposing a set of standards of orthodoxy that must be adhered to for one to be welcome. These are core beliefs for me because it is what I see played out in scripture, in story after story. It is not just Paul who ventures beyond the comfortable places to share the Good News of God’s saving love in the person of Jesus Christ. It is Christ himself who encourages me to move beyond certainty and embrace my own questions and doubts, and to welcome others as they seek to make meaning in their lives. Questions are welcome, as they – and I – as we seek to live life in community, supporting and upholding each other through joyful and difficult times.

During Lent this year we will hear a number of these stories – stories where Jesus welcomed a wide variety of people to gather around the table and to be fed by abundant grace. Jesus welcomed people who questioned him and questioned his teachings; welcomed those whom society pushed aside – women and children, people with questionable occupations like tax collectors, those who were felled by illnesses and disabilities. As I mentioned in the announcements, on Thursday nights beginning on February 15, I invite you to gather with Rebecca and me, as we explore the feeding stories in the Gospel of Luke. We will have a simple supper, share in prayer, read the scripture and seek meaning for our individual and communal lives as we ask questions of these stories. These stories will also be our Sunday worship scriptures during Lent.

We at PCO are called to be a faithful community of people sharing the abundant love of God – a God who chose to create a world full of beauty and mystery, giving us gifts of curiosity and logic so we might seek understanding of its principles; a God who chose to engage with us directly in the messiness of life by sending Jesus to walk with us, teach us, heal us, and welcome us; a God who gave us a companion in the Holy Spirit to help us hear how God is still speaking into our world today. As we explore ways to be this faithful community, may we always make room for those who bring their questions and their doubts. For many of us, questions and doubts are part of the faith journey. As pastor and author Brian McLaren shares, “If we dare take a first step, we discover that faith can be a road, a doorway out of the fortress prison of certainty and into the adventure of living.”⁶ And as the apostle Paul invites the Athenians and us, may we search for God and perhaps fumble about for God and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For there is always room, even – especially – when we have questions and doubts. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁶ Brian D. McClaren, *Faith After Doubt*, St. Martin’s Essentials. 2021 p40.