

Paul and the Athenians
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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John 14:15-21

15“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Acts 17:22-31

22Then 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.’ 29Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Paul is in a foreign land. Literally. Athens.

It is his second missionary journey, and it has taken him to Greece.

Paul is in a foreign land, figuratively.

Polytheistic. Academic. Athens is known

“for its interest in the divine and its openness to discussion of philosophies and religions.”¹

¹ Chris Haslam <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/aeas6m.shtml>
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3256

Given this information, what Paul does is significant.
 Paul doesn't pull one of his greatest hits sermons out of the barrel,
 Paul takes the time to learn. To listen. To figure out where he is. Who is around him.
 That's the way that he crafts the message of Christ.
 For **this** place. For **these** people.

It's the same message, Christ born, lived, died, and resurrected,
 but Paul delivers it in a way that, he hopes, will enable these people to hear.

Is Paul selling out?
 Is he selling the gospel short?
 Why doesn't he talk about Jesus more, and the other Gods less?
 For that matter, why doesn't he mention Jesus at all?
 What happens here, and how it is written, is not coincidental or accidental.
 They are making a crucial and important point for us:
 The Good News of God does not
 look or sound or feel like just one thing.
 And that's not something to fear, it's part of what makes the Good News Good.

Professor Matt Skinner says it this way:²
 "The gospel sounds different everywhere it is told. That's because the gospel does not exist in some unadulterated form in isolation from human language, culture, or presuppositions. It's always enfolded in some way--linguistically, culturally, personally. How would we understand it, or recognize it as good news for us, if it weren't?"

Leonard Sweet uses these words:³
 "The mystery of the gospel is this: It is always the same (content), and it is always changing (containers). In fact, for the gospel to remain the same, it has to change. Our task is to pour living water into anything anyone will pick up. If I want to reach my twenty second century children, I must be prepared to pour the living water into containers out of which I myself would never be caught dead drinking... A lot of churches are languishing because they won't trust the gospel to fit or fill containers with handles they don't like."

Why is this significant. Why?
 Because the church is changing.

Years ago, the Presbytery appointed me to moderate a Session for a nearby church whose pastor had recently moved. At our first meeting, I asked each elder to introduce themselves and to tell me how and

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=886

³ Sweet, Leonard. Aqua Church: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture. Group Publishing, 1999.

why they had become a member of this particular church. One elder reported that he had started attending 50 years ago because when he moved to town the local newspaper reported his arrival and concluded the article with “Dr. Smith and his wife will be attending the First Presbyterian Church.” So, not wanting to dispute what had been reported, they started attending First Presbyterian and had never left.

We don’t live in that world anymore. You know that. I know that. But let’s put some numbers to it.

Last year, the Pew Research Group⁴ reported that between 2007 and 2014, a span of just seven years, the percentage of people in the United States who consider themselves to be Christian dropped by 8%, from 78-70%. Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Mainline Protestants (where Presbyterians would reside) all experienced declines- 1%, 3%, and 3% respectively. Non-Christian faiths did show some increase of a little over 1%, but the largest player in these numbers? The rise in those who are unaffiliated, a jump of almost 7%.

And the changes aren’t just with those who are not affiliated with any church.

The trends for church members have changed, too. People give less. Sports, travel, busyness also take a toll. An active member is no longer in worship 90% of the time. And active member is now classified as someone who will be in worship just two Sundays a month. Make no mistake, that changes communities of faith, too.

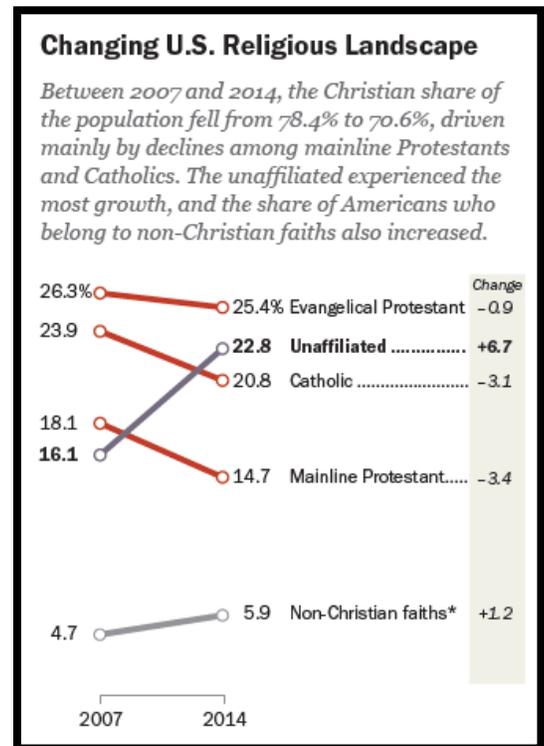
It’s not all bad news, of course.

In fact, I think there’s quite a bit of Good News in these numbers and trends.

Such good news, that if you asked me if I’d like to go back to the way things were in the 1950s when people went to church because they were supposed to go to church, I’d tell you no way.

Absolutely. No. Way.

And that’s because without the social pressure, the people who **are** in the pews are here because you want to be here. Because you need to be here. Because you know the hunger and the thirst that only Christ can quench, and you know that this world needs, demands, nothing less than real discipleship if God’s kingdom is going to be realized.



⁴ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

And if you are reading the same newspapers I'm reading,
 Watching the same newscasts I'm watching,
 our world doesn't just need a little of God's kingdom.
 We need a lot of it. A lot of justice and love and hope and mercy and peace.

So I don't want to go back.
 Quite frankly, I think this is the most exciting time to be a Christian, to be the church,
 that I've seen in my lifetime.
 I believe God is working through us, through you, to be a force,
 like Paul, that is going to change the world for centuries to come.

So what does all of this mean?
 It means that we, people of faith, have far more in common, with Paul than we likely realize.
 We, too, are living in a land where, if we want to be true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
 we need to pay attention.
 We need to learn from those who are around us, wherever we might find ourselves.

As much as it might be appealing, we can't do what John Prine recommends in one of my favorite songs,
 "Spanish Pipedream," about a soldier who is lost and meets a dancer who tells him what they need to do.⁵

*Blow up your TV, throw away your paper
 Go to the country, build you a home
 Plant a little garden, eat a lot of peaches
 Try and find Jesus on your own.*

Nope. That doesn't work for Christians. As tempting as running away might be, we're called to a
 different life. Much more like the life found in another song, this one by Carrie Newcomer, who wrote
 about what an authentic Christian community looks like in her song "Betty's Diner."⁶

*Miranda works the late night counter
 In a joint called Betty's Diner*

*Arthur lets his earl gray steep
 Since April it's been hard to sleep
 You know they tried most everything
 Yet it took her in the end*

*Kevin tests new saxophones
 But swears he's leaving quality control
 For the Chicago scene, or New Orleans
 Where they still play righteous horns*

⁵ <https://johnprine.com/>

⁶ <http://www.carriewcomer.com/sites/default/files/Betty%27s%20Diner.pdf>
<https://www.onbeing.org/program/carrie-newcomer-a-conversation-with-music/7049>

*Jack studies here after work
To get past high school he's the first
And his large hands seem just as comfortable
With a hammer or a pen*

*Here we are all in one place
The wants and wounds of the human race
Despair and hope sit face to face
When you come in from the cold
Let her fill your cup with something kind
Eggs and toast like bread and wine
She's heard it all so she don't mind*

*Deidra bites her lip and frowns
She works the stop and go downtown
She's pretty good at the crossword page
And she paints her eyes blue black
Tristan comes along sometimes
Small for his age and he's barely five
But she loves him like a mama lion*

*Veda used to drink a lot
Almost lost it all before she stopped
Comes in at night with her friend Mike
Who runs the crisis line*

*Michael toured Saigon and back
Hair the color of smoke and ash
Their heads are bowed and hands are clasped
One more storm has passed*

*Here we are all in one place
The wants and wounds of the human race
Despair and hope sit face to face
When you come in from the cold
Let her fill your cup with something kind
Eggs and toast like bread and wine
She's heard it all so she don't mind*

That, my friends, is the sermon on the mount in 21st century terms.

Paul's message to Athenians for today.

That God is here with us.

God isn't leading us out of it, God is leading us into the middle of it.

The middle of it all. And a part of that is listening. Learning.

And only out of that listening and learning can come authentic sharing.

Sharing with your sibling, who hasn't been to church in years.

With the neighbor who has just moved in. The co-worker who feels lost and uncertain.
 The friend you connect with over coffee.
 Not because you know what will save them, but because you know what saved you,
 which you can share because you are in relationship with your
 sibling, your co-worker, your neighbor.

We recognize that not only are we Paul in this scenario,
 we are the ones to whom he is preaching.
 Not only are we the waitress at the diner, we are the customers, too.

The kingdom of God isn't just being welcomed into the world,
 it's being welcomed into our own hearts and lives.
 Which will lead to deeper devotion. Different choices. Greater presence.

Finally, I want to conclude today with what happens after the lectionary passage for today ends.
 After Paul's great speech.
 Do all of the Athenians drop whatever they are doing and follow the way of Christ? Not at all.

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ At that point Paul left them. ³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."

The progress in the life of faith is not in fell swoops, but in increments.
 Not in moments, but in lifetimes.
 In inches, not miles.
 Be not discouraged, be encouraged, for God is not done with us.

Dionysius, Damarius.
 John and Alice and Martha.
 Bob and Margaret and Joshua.
 And you and you and you. And me.

Amen. Amen.