

Sermon: Common Ground
Text: Acts 17:22-28
Date: July 23, 2017
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

'In him we live and move and have our being . . .'

Acts 17:28

Back when I was a student preacher, so back around the time of the last ice age, I took a class called "Preaching the Gospel of Mark." It was a great class, one of the best I ever took.

I was frankly electrified by the insights I was gaining, not so much into the art of preaching, as such, but into the nature of Jesus's teaching and ministry, how boundary-breaking they were--touching the unclean, healing on the Sabbath, speaking openly and directly to women of all things.

Somehow, growing up in the church of my childhood, I had missed how revolutionary all this was this. Not surprising really. After all, my youth group leader called seminary "cemetery": the place faith goes to die. But for me it was the opposite. It was the place where mine was resurrected.

Every student in the class had to preach a practice sermon before our professors and classmates. When my turn came, the excitement I was feeling, the electricity generated by the things I was learning about the Christ and the Gospel, must have come through in my sermon.

Because a few weeks later I discovered that I had won one of the top preaching awards in the class. Clearly this says something sad about the dubious quality of that particular group of aspiring preachers.

But my point is that, when I got this news, I promptly sent that sermon to my mother. My mother who dedicated me to God's service when I was tiny. My mother who prayed for me nearly every day of her life, and who faithfully took me to Sunday school and church nearly every Sunday of mine.

I thought she would read that sermon and then, breathing a deep sigh of pride, satisfaction and relief, say to herself, *My work here is done. I got my son to where he needs to be to pursue his calling as a minister and preacher.*

But to my harsh surprise, that's not what happened. "Mom, what did you think of my sermon?" I eagerly asked when I called her a couple of days later, hungry for her validation and affirmation.

"I thought it was good," she replied. But her tone belied that claim. It was the same a tone she might have used to describe a piece of poorly cooked fish that my dad had proudly served her. "I thought it was *good*."

I had to work hard not to interject about how I had somehow, miraculously, managed to write a sermon that stood out at a seminary known for its preaching program.

But I kept silent. Instead I steeled myself for whatever was coming, for the reason my sweet, deeply devout mother was going to give for effectively awarding my sermon a grade of C-.

"It needed more Bible," she asserted. Like this would have been obvious to me had I not gone to *seminary*.

Apparently, she wanted fewer stories that illustrated and illuminated the truth of the Gospel, and more quotes from the Gospel itself.

I tell this story not to comment on my mother's theory of good preaching. She gave me my faith, and her prayers kept me alive through some sketchy times. And I would never find fault with her beliefs.

Contrary to all outward appearances, nor do I tell it to give myself a public pat on the back for winning a minor academic award back when dinosaurs roamed the earth.

I mention it only to say that I have lately taken great consolation from the responses I've seen to the sermon I just read -- the one at the center of our text for today.

After Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, Paul's sermon here is, without doubt, the second most famous sermon in the Bible.

It's famous in part because of the context. Paul preached it in front of the Areopagus, a prominent rock outcropping near the Acropolis in Athens--a place you can still visit today, where you can imagine that you're standing there in Paul's shoes, preaching a world-famous sermon.

(Which some of us might have done on a trip to Greece with a group of college friends back in the day.)

And he preached it to a crowd of Athenians, which is to say, to one of the most intellectually sophisticated audiences ever, a group schooled in the philosophical tradition of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, of the Stoics and Epicureans.

Which in turn makes the response to it so fascinating. And by response, I mean not from the Athenians so much as from contemporary commentators and biblical scholars

It turns out there is one whole camp of scholars who believe the sermon to be almost a sell-out. They fault it for much the same reason my mom faulted my little sermon back in the day: namely because it needed more Bible.

In fact, in this case, it has none. Zero. Not one verse of scripture in the whole thing.

In fairness, that's not how we do things in the Reformed preaching tradition in which I and every other Presbyterian minister was trained. As you well know, in our tradition we first read a biblical text, then we use the sermon to unpack it. (Opinions do vary dramatically as to how long it should take to do that!)

Paul does not do that. Instead he quotes a Greek poet, offering a line that would have been instantly familiar to his listeners, one that would have resonated deeply with his audience of Athenian intellectuals.

In him we live and move and have our being.

Strictly speaking this is true. We do live and move and have our being in the God who created everything that is, including us.

But Paul wants to take that idea to the next level. He wants the Athenians to know that this unnamed, unknown God is the God revealed to us in Jesus.

The point he hopes to drive home is that this God wants to be known to them, and to everyone, not as a philosophical abstraction or a poetic ideal, but as a living presence.

So, it is a beautiful line, a strong foundation for a sermon. But technically it's not in the Bible -- not at that point anyway.

As part of Paul's sermon, the line has since become enshrined in the book of Acts, and resonates deeply for us, too. But it's not a Christian idea. It's a Greek idea.

Which is why it's seen by more than a few scholars as a kind of wishy washy approach to preaching. Like basing a sermon on John Keats, rather than on the Gospel of John.

If you want poetry, go to a poetry slam. But in this school, we're here to preach the boundary-breaking Good News of the Gospel, the revolutionary truth of God's loving embrace of the whole world, including the likes of you. And me.

So, that's a persuasive argument.

But there is another camp that sees Paul's effort here differently. In this view, the Gospel does not exist in some pure, ideal form, separate from human language and ideas. It's not something separate from us that we merely point to.

Matt Skinner, a professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, puts it this way:

[The Gospel] is always enfolded in some way--linguistically, culturally, personally. How would we understand it, or recognize it as good news for us, if it didn't come to us in language we could understand (from workingpreacher.com, May 29, 2011).

On this view, this "enfolding" begins with the Incarnation itself. Jesus took on human form in a specific place and time. He operated within a specific culture. He told stories about the Kingdom of God, using specific objects from that time -- coins, sheep, seeds, widows. And these specific and easily accessible stories conveyed the universal and deep, eternal truths he came to reveal.

So for this group, Paul's use of local language and Greek concepts is an act of genius.

It was a strategy that allowed him first to connect with his audience, and then, having established common ground with them, he could take the next step.

He could explore with them one of the most important question in the world: do we in fact, live and move and have our being in the living God, and if so, what does that mean? What does that look like?

So I've been pondering this question all week: If Paul were giving this sermon today to, say, coal miners in West Virginia, or to farm workers here in North Carolina, or bankers on Wall Street, or software engineers in the Silicon valley, or students at Warren Wilson College, what would it look like? What form would this common ground take?

I've been pondering this question because it strikes me as a variation of one of the goals of our ministry plan: How do we deepen our engagement with and service to the wider community?

How do we find common ground with our neighbors who do not worship with us, and who may not share our faith or our worldview?

It turns out I got a vivid answer to that question from an unexpected source, from someone I've never met.

Gary Liederbach is one of the so-called "Leader/Servants" of a group called the One Direction Community. I get the sense that this community is one of these new alternative churches that we see springing up in movies theaters and brew pubs across the country.

Which is to say, churches that no longer look like church as we know it. And churches that in many cases, also happen to be growing by leaps and bounds.

I think Leader/Servant is their way of saying Gary Liederbach is their pastor.

Liederbach makes an intentional point of finding common ground with his audience. But not as Paul did, in terms of language and ideas. He makes it in terms of place.

"My morning office is the Waffle House," he writes.

One sentence in and already I'm invested in this story, because I pass a Waffle House every single day on my way to work, only I don't stop. I keep going to my nice office here on this beautiful campus.

He continues: "About 3 months ago I went into the Waffle House and I sat down on a [stool] at the "low bar" . . . I did not notice the used coffee cup that was on the bar in the back next to the menu rack in front of the [stool] I sat on.

"It belonged to a man I will call Chuck, who happened to have gone outside to smoke a morning cigarette.

"Chuck is a man who comes frequently to the Waffle House. He is a 'rough' and crude man in his late 50's. He cusses allot [sic] and gives the waitresses and customers a hard time and is sharp with them when he is 'in that mood.'

"Chuck walked back into the Waffle House, saw me sitting on 'his stool,' walked up to me and said coldly 'Hey [blankety blank] you are in my seat!'

"I turned to him and before I could say a word the two waitresses who were standing there almost jumped over the bar and verbally attacked Chuck.

"One said, "Now you listen here you blankety blank this man here is a blanking man of God and if you ever talk to him like that again I will kick your blankety blank.

The other waitress jumped in, "Yeah, you blanket blank, he is my blanking pastor! What the blank is wrong with you.!" Show some blankety blank respect!

"The waitresses high fived each other and one said to the other. 'Sword of the spirit [grrrl]!' [Not surprisingly] Chuck turned and walked out."

Over the weeks and months that Gary Leiderbach had been coming into the Waffle House, he had gotten to know these two waitresses well. One day he overheard them commiserating about how hard their lives were, how hard they were struggling to make ends meet, to make things work for themselves and their families.

So he pulled out his phone, called up his Bible app and shared with them a passage from Ephesians that talks about the armor of God, including the Sword of the Spirit. Grrl.

Neither of these two women had ever been to the One Direction Community. But because of his investment in them, he became their pastor in that moment, a point they drove home in the incident with Chuck.

Meanwhile, Gary Liederbach's relationship with Chuck was just beginning. It's a long story, and worth your time. But let me just summarize it briefly here.¹

A couple months later, Liederbach stopped into the Waffle House and found Chuck waiting for him outside.

It turns out Chuck had been diagnosed with cancer and he was desperate to tell someone. He went on to confide to Pastor Gary that he had served in Vietnam and done things there he could not forget, things for which he could not forgive himself.

Things for which he was sure God could not forgive him. Which is why he stopped going to church when he came back home. And why he believed he now had cancer. It was what he deserved.

Of course this is not true. God is not in the business of punishing us for our mistakes. Quite the opposite. The truth of God's boundless grace, mercy and forgiveness like at the very heart of the Gospel.

But this belief did explain why Chuck was now such a hard man. Because his guilt had made him that way.

He'd wrapped a protective shell around himself to keep from becoming close enough to someone that he had to tell them the story of why he was the way he was, a story rooted in what he'd done in the villages and jungles of Vietnam.

But even that is not the end of this story. Just a few weeks later, Gary Leiderman once again found Chuck waiting for him outside the Waffle House.

Evidently Chuck had had a son, only now that son was dead. By his own hand. But not on purpose.

¹ The full story can be found on the ODC "Conversation blog" for July 14, 2017:

<https://www.onedirection.community/conversations/>

It seems his son was showing off, to his friend, the new pistol he'd just bought. He took the clip out, thought the gun was unloaded but it was not.

The pistol only ever fired one shot but it killed Chuck's son. And now Chuck wondered if Gary Leiderman would help him inter his son's ashes in his backyard.

Whatever your preferred approach to preaching may be - whether you believe the best sermons are preached in church and filled with biblical quotes, or whether you believe the Gospel is always enfleshed in a specific time and place, and best conveyed by stories filled with specific, concrete references to the world in which we live, either way the truth -- like this or not -- the truth is that we're all preachers.

Everything we do and say, the places we go, the things we buy, the causes we support, the candidates we vote for -- all of this testifies to what we believe. It speaks to our deepest values as people of faith.

That matters because while it is true that we live and move and have our being in the living God, it is also true that every person we meet lives and moves and sometimes struggles to survive in a world that can be brutally hard and astonishingly cruel and unforgiving.

Every person has stories they want and sometimes need to tell. Every person has challenges they cannot cope with alone, sorrows they cannot bear. And, yes, sometimes they have joys they simply cannot keep to themselves.

And it is our privilege, as members of the body of Christ, to embody the presence of God, to convey to our neighbors with our love and presence, and sometimes even with our words, the truth of God's love and presence with and for them.

Amen