

“A Relevant Faith for Our Time”
Text: Acts 17:22-33
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
May 24, 2009

“When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’” Acts 17:32

Maybe you have heard of the international project, “This I Believe,” which asks diverse people to share and discuss the core values that shape their daily lives. The short faith statements are recorded and can be heard on the radio. My favorite is by a kindergartner from Austin, Texas named Tarak McClain. For the 100th day of kindergarten, each student was asked to bring one hundred things to class. Some brought cotton balls, or pecans, or cheerios, Tarak brought beliefs. In the interview, Tarak reads 30 of his 100 beliefs. Included are, “I believe God is in everything. I believe hate is a cause for love. I believe everyone is weird in their own way. I believe people should go outside more. I believe I should not whine. I believe it’s okay to die but not to kill. I believe we live best in a community.”¹ It is a worthwhile exercise for all of us; what do you believe; what are the guiding values that shape your life? And how would you communicate them to others? What words and phrases would you use?

The Apostle Paul arrived for a short layover in the great city of Athens, hometown of Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Paul found there a fertile ground for his message. Only Paul would have seen it that way. The Book of Acts records that he encountered and debated great Epicurean and Stoic philosophers as well as devout Jews. Athens was the center of philosophical debate and reasoned rhetoric in the ancient world. Well-heeled citizens sat in the city square and argued with one another about what made for the good life. The city was filled with dozens of temples to different gods and goddesses, and with devoted followers of them all. And the Greeks were always on the lookout for a new god. In fact, when Paul and Barnabas arrive in Lystra just four chapters earlier, the Greek citizens try to worship them as gods, Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes (Acts 14:11-12). After only a short time in town, Paul is invited to speak at the Areopagus, the most public pulpit in all of Athens. What would he say? How would he convert these pagans to the worship of the living God? “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Flattery is always a good place to start. Paul knows, as John Calvin knew, that we humans tend toward worship, always in search of newer and shinier graven images.

And so, in a city filled with idol worship, Paul stands atop Mars Hill and he preaches the gospel. This I believe. He does so using the language and themes of his audience. Pointing to an altar dedicated to an unknown god, Paul reveals that he knows precisely who this god is. The creator of all that exists, the name above every name, the all-powerful and only God. Using the language of Greek poetry, Paul explains that this is the one in whom we live and move and have our being, this is the one who created us.

Passionately, he proclaims that the one true God cannot be cast in gold or silver and cannot be confined in shrines of human design. This God, our God, is dynamic, active, and on the move.

Several weeks ago, our congregation welcomed Rabbi Ronald Segal from Temple Sinai to speak as part of our ***Morningside in Conversation with Other Faiths*** series. We had asked Rabbi Segal to answer this simple little query: what is the central question facing the faith community today, and what perspective does your religious tradition offer in responding to it? For Rabbi Segal, the central question was not the one of orthodoxy (right belief), or orthopraxy (right action) but of relevance. What relevant message does the faith community have in our time? Segal explained that a century ago the church and the synagogue were relevant because they held intrinsic, unquestioned authority and, with authority comes relevance. But today, he argued, because of changes in the way our culture grants authority, the order is reversed. In order to gain authority, the synagogue and the church must seek relevance to the lives of its members and its community.

From that day until this one, I have been thinking about the importance of relevance in proclaiming the truths of our faith in a culture obsessed with idols, American or otherwise. Don't be too concerned; I do not believe relevance requires stadium seating or endlessly repeated praise choruses. But I do believe that relevance is critical to the church today, and I think Paul models it for us.

The title "a nation of seekers" could have described First Century Greece as well as it does 21st Century America, where we find our neighbors, and ourselves, searching for meaning anywhere they (or we) can find it. What gives our lives meaning? The questions are no different than those asked on town square in Athens two thousand years ago. In that setting, Paul proclaims the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gracious providence of God. Without timidity and with conviction, Paul preaches the gospel in relevant and compelling ways.

It is time for the Christian community to do the same. For far too long we have allowed our faith to be defined by those who proclaim fear and division rather than hope and unity. We have remained silent while the church slid into irrelevance and the wider culture fell into the traps of selfishness and greed. We have been silent. Now is the time to proclaim what we believe. I think of little Will Prevost, baptized this morning in our sanctuary. I think of the promises you all made to him and his family as part of the sacrament. What kind of Christian community will be waiting for Will when he is old enough to ask questions and have crises? Will the church be able to capture his imagination and feed his soul and give him hope and guide his decisions? What is the church that we can see from here? A dying institution at war within itself and oblivious to the needs of the world around it, or a resurrected community of believers poised to proclaim hope to the world in word and deed?

As a pastor, I have found that friends, acquaintances, and people I have just met often share with me the reasons why they are not in the church. Some tell me apologetically, others with righteous indignation, and some with outright dismissal. For some it is an

inability to believe the doctrine and theology of the church, or to accept the Biblical scriptures. The stories that hurt me the most, however, come from those for whom the largest impediment to active faith is not our scripture or our theology but firsthand experience in the church. Some of you could give witness to the feelings of exclusion. One friend put it as simply and painfully as I have ever heard, “I could not be a part of an institution that preached love and acceptance in the abstract and practiced hostility and exclusion when it came to me.” Such inconsistency simply will not sustain us in Athens, whether Greece or Georgia. What both places cry out for in our time is a relevant faith.

I can tell you this—people are watching what the Christian community is doing. We do have an audience in the contemporary Areopagus. I have a friend who lives and writes in New York City. Alex is not a churchgoing believer and yet has been one of my most prized and trusted spiritual advisors since we met freshman year of college. This Spring, I was preparing to speak before the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta about why I believe the pathway for ordination should be cleared for all whom God calls, including faithful gay and lesbian Presbyterians who are in committed relationships. Naturally, I sent a draft of my remarks to Alex. Almost three months later, his reply remains on my desk as a reminder of how those outside the church might view what is happening among us. The reply closes with these words: “it just seems like love and acceptance and what's in one's heart needs to supercede an old, antiquated regulation.”

Relevant faith for our time cannot run from honest debates, must not retreat to ivory towers or stained-glass cathedrals. Relevant faith for our time does not make an idol of stability but is prepared to follow God's Spirit into the future. Relevant faith for our time is a witness to the world of the boundary-breaking, inclusive, overwhelming, and unstoppable love of God. The Apostle Paul traveled thousands of miles to stand in town squares unembarrassed to say what he believed and why. Are we ready to do the same? The world around us wants to hear a word from the church; which word will it be?

In his newest book, Tom Long recounts the story of Grace Thomas. Several years ago she was buried at the First Baptist Church cemetery in Decatur. Chances are that you have never heard of Grace Thomas. She was the child of a streetcar conductor from Birmingham, Alabama. She married and moved to Atlanta where she raised a family, worked as a secretary at the state capitol and attended law school at night.

After several years, when she finally graduated from law school, she astonished her family by announcing that she had decided not to practice law and instead to enter the 1954 election race for governor of Georgia. There were nine candidates for governor that year, eight men and Grace, but there was really only one issue: the Brown vs. Board of Education decision that the Supreme Court had made earlier that year declaring that school segregation was unconstitutional; the case was decided 55 years ago last Sunday. Eight of the gubernatorial candidates spoke out angrily against the court's decision. Only Grace said she thought the decision was fair. Her slogan was “say Grace at the polls.” Not many did, she came in dead last. Her relieved family was pleased that she had gotten that out of her system. But she had not.

Eight years later, in 1962 she ran for governor again. The civil rights movement was in full bloom and the stakes were high. She traveled around the state with a message of tolerance and racial harmony. She received death threats and traveled with her family to protect her.

One day, Grace made a campaign appearance in the little town of Louisville, Georgia. In those days, the focal point of the town square in Louisville was not a Civil War monument or a county courthouse, but an old slave market where human beings had once been bought and sold. She decided to give her speech under the canopy of that slave market. She addressed a crowd of farmers and merchants and she pointed at the slave market and said, "The old has passed away and the new has come. This place represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, when Georgians white and black can join hands and work together." Provocative talk in the Georgia of 1962. Somebody in the crowd shouted at her, "Are you a communist?" "No. I am not." She said softly.

"Then where did you get those crazy ideas?"

Grace thought for a minute. And then she pointed at the steeple of a nearby church and she said, "I got them over there...in Sunday School."ⁱⁱ

The story from the Book of Acts ends with a intriguingly hopeful phrase. Those who do not mock Paul's proclamation leave him with these words: "we will hear you again about this." Sisters and brothers, we are blessed to live in a time when the world is again willing and eager to hear from us. There is still time to show the world what the Christian community is at its best. The world will hear from us again. This I believe.

ⁱ http://thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=57159&topessays=2&start=15

ⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009. pp. 19-20.