



August 4, 2019



*Sermon Series: Mountaintop Experiences*

## The Areopagus in Athens: A Place Where Our World Gets A Little Bit Bigger

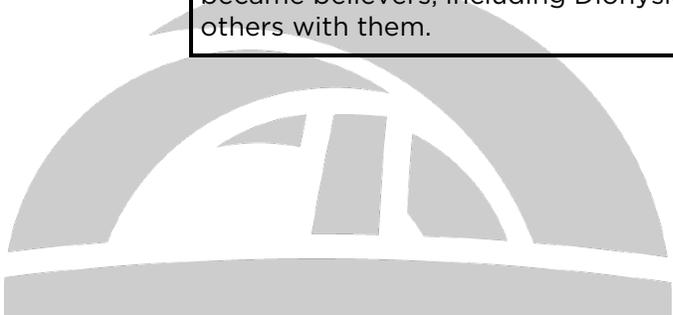
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

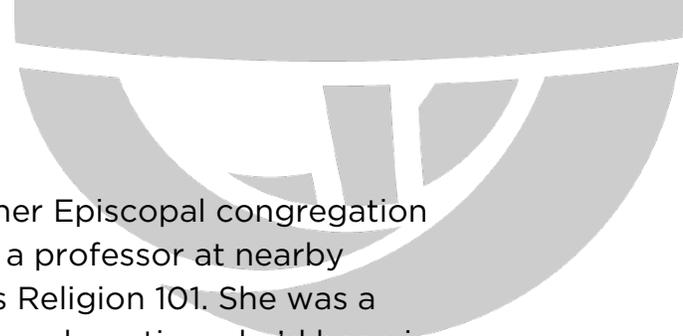
### **Acts 17:16-34 NRSV**

<sup>16</sup>While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this 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.) <sup>19</sup>So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup>It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." <sup>21</sup>Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

<sup>22</sup>Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>The 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, <sup>25</sup>nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup>From 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, <sup>27</sup>so 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. <sup>28</sup>For '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.' <sup>29</sup>Since 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. <sup>30</sup>While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because 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."

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





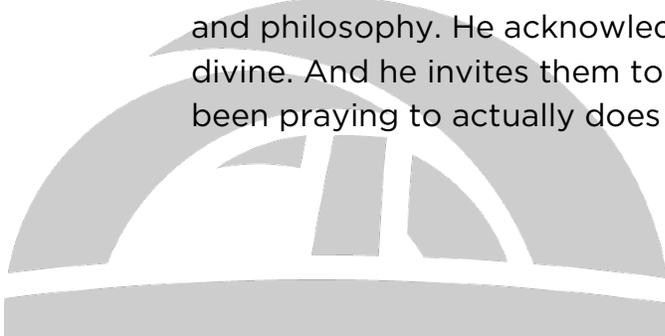
When Barbara Brown Taylor left serving her Episcopal congregation in the Georgia Appalachian foothills to become a professor at nearby Piedmont College, the first class she taught was Religion 101. She was a mixture of excited and apprehensive. It had been a long time she'd been in a classroom. Her own faith had grown a bit stagnant. She was hoping that contrasting Christianity with other religions of the world would affirm that the faith she had been raised in, had given her life to, was indeed the right path - for her, and for all.

On the first day of class she set up some visual aids on her desk: a brass menorah, a statue of Buddha, a carved wooden cross, an open copy of the Qu'ran on a stand. Then, she passed out a detailed syllabus that set forth everything they would cover in the next few months. In her mind, the differences between Christianity and the other major world faiths would be clear, concise, and compelling. It was just a matter of laying them out so her students could draw the same conclusions.

But as the semester progressed, Taylor discovered something disconcerting: "I could not teach other people's religions without loving them as I loved my own, or at least giving it my best shot," she said. This turned out to be much more difficult than she thought. For how do you love something without giving it your whole heart? How do you stay faithful while being open to other perspectives?

I can't you exactly how Taylor reconciled this challenge ... I'm only a couple of chapters into *Holy Envy*, the book detailing her journey. But so far I'm finding it fascinating. Because, like her, I've always approached learning about other religions from an academic perspective that's framed by my own experience as a Christian. Oh, I've taken the field trips and outlined the major tenets and even tried to read some other holy texts. But it's always been grounded in my belief that Christianity has the right answers. After all: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus said. "No one comes to the father except by me." Right?

Now, I confess I sometimes find something a little arrogant about that attitude, and yet I know I desperately want to feel confidence that what I've learned in Sunday School and seminary is true. So when I listen to Paul's speech at the Areopagus I am filled with an envy of my own. There's a reason this chapter in Acts is used as a master class for evangelical witness. Paul's arguments are peppered with references to Greek culture, poetry, and philosophy. He acknowledges that they share the thirst to know the divine. And he invites them to consider that the unknown god they have been praying to actually does have a name; that this god has more in





common with them than they think. You do not worship what you do not know, Paul argues. You seek to worship the one in whose image you are made. Paul is respectful and open even as he invites the Athenians to repent and turn to God. Paul doesn't chastise them for their religious infidelity, or dismiss their worth because they think differently than he does. He shares his story and accepts their response – good, bad, or indifferent. Maybe that's because Paul sees the next steps as out of his hands. Isn't it, after all? At the heart of witness is the belief that the Holy Spirit is the one who does the work. It's not up to us to have just the right things to say or the perfect argument to win converts. It's just up to us to show up wholeheartedly, empathically, and with humility.

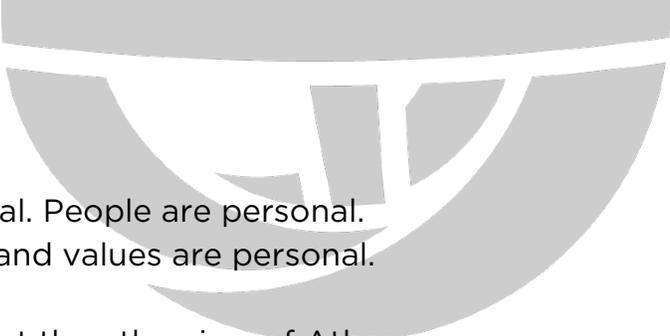
A few years ago I heard a line on NPR that has stuck with me. It was during an interview with a climate scientist from Texas Tech University named Katherine Yott. She was talking about the challenge of trying to educate about changing weather patterns. At first, she said, she'd show up with charts and graphs and gobs of data. But she found herself drawn into debates with people who already believed she was wrong. And so she changed her approach. Instead of trying to prove her point, she began by asking what extreme weather events they'd observed in their own communities. And then, they'd talk about how the community had responded to it. No matter where she was teaching, almost everyone had a story of a hurricane or a tornado or a drought. And as she listened to the stories of how neighbors had helped neighbors, she was able to connect some of the dots – and most importantly, to talk about what we need to do differently in the future to try and prevent those things from happening again. And then she said that line that's stuck with me: Facts don't change people's minds, she said. Solutions do.

People, this is where our shared lives of faith begin: with listening. With giving others our full attention, with sitting with them wherever they are, with appreciating their basic worth as fellow humans.

Let me go out on a limb and say there's not enough listening in our world today – at least, not enough of the kind that can build bridges and tear down walls.

Next week we're starting a new series on The Art of Neighboring. It's based on a book by Dave Runyon and Jay Pathak. It feels like just the right time to dig deeper into the day-to-day relationships that we have right in front of us. Because that is where peace begins – one heart at a time, one story at a time, one relationship at a time.





If it feels personal, it's because it is personal. People are personal. Cities are personal. Stories are personal. Beliefs and values are personal. Guess what? The gospel is personal too.

The world we live in isn't too much different than the view of Athens we get from Luke. It's filled with people who are 'spiritual but not religious.' It's filled with religious pluralism. It's filled with people who take a cafeteria-style approach to faith, picking and choosing what tenets they believe and dismissing the rest. Faith is too often a matter of convenience, not a way of life.

But every day we encounter people who are searching for the divine just like we are. They may look and sound and worship very differently. But they belong to God, too. We have things to learn from them, and they from us. Isn't that what it means to be on this particular mountain? The Areopagus epitomizes every time we step forth seeking to understand a little more about the people around us. Because every time we do, our world gets a little bit bigger.

As you set forth into your version of the Areopagus - be it at work or at school or in your community - I would challenge you to do two things: First, *name what is it that compels you to love Jesus*. That's one of those questions that every one of us in this room who claim to be Christian should have a ready answer to. It doesn't have to be complicated. But that answer is at the heart of how you encounter this text from Acts. Because if you can share, freely and without hesitation, why your loyalty belongs with Christ, you can maybe start to imagine what compelled Paul to stand up before the Areopagus.

And second, put that answer in your back pocket for awhile. There is nothing to lose by starting not with words, but with listening. That kind of listening will make our world a little bit bigger. But I am convinced it makes our view of God a little bit bigger too. Because God created each and every one of the people you will meet. God loves them just like God loves you and me. And when we seek to listen and understand we meet the embodiment of that love, Jesus Christ, again and again and again.

Enjoy your journey on this mountain. There's a lot to learn. But know this: you don't ever make that journey alone. God is always one step ahead of you. Amen.

