



TOUCH POINT

## Look Out! – Touchpoint for May 10, 2023

**Acts 17:22-31 (NRSVUE)** <sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual 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 peoples 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 fumble about 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.”

### Grace and peace from the Mystery...

Oh heck, let me just go to the line in our Bible passage:

**“...in whom we live and move and have our being.”**

Were you really wondering what I was going to talk about today?

There is so much going on here. Paul is speaking to a group of Athenians who don’t know who he is or what he is talking about. And that is hard for us to understand. Because, you see, we have all grown up in a culture where Christianity is the dominant religion. The religious coin of the realm. In fact, for the last 1,700 years or so, Christianity has been the predominant religion in western civilization.

When we speak of Christianity, everyone knows what we are talking about. But Paul is speaking from the perspective of a minority sect of Judaism... which was a minority religion, in a minority culture, of a minority tribe, in a minority political part of the world.

Christianity, as we understand it, didn’t exist at this point in history. No one knew who he was or what he was talking about. And so, when he speaks to the dominant culture of his day, he is trying to find connecting points, touch points if you will. He isn’t standing outside of them telling them they have to assimilate into his world view, which is always what the dominant culture tells you you have to do. They would laugh at him for that.

No, he is trying to find a place of common ground from which he can begin to tell *his* story and how it connects with *their* story.

Now some might be amazed he doesn't mention Jesus by name, or the crucifixion, or sacrificial atonement in this sermon. He doesn't talk about Advent or Lent. They know nothing of these things, and that is OK. That is a luxury of the majority – to only speak in our language, and our concepts, on our terms... and expect others to join, or go to hell.

What Paul is doing has a biblical basis as well. In Acts 15, two chapters earlier, there is the Council of Jerusalem where the apostles are trying to figure out what rules to impose on those in the gentile world who are becoming followers of the Way. Some wanted the gentiles to have to follow all of the Hebrew scripture, including circumcision. The council decided otherwise, and said that the only rules the gentiles had to follow were those found in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Only those moral obligations given to Adam and Noah are binding for all of humanity.

*THAT'S IT!* Everything after doesn't apply. Think about that. What if your pastor stood up and held that part of the Bible from Genesis 12 to the end of the Old Testament and said, "None of this applies to us!?" How would you react? How would your fellow parishioners react? Even the Bible says we don't have to follow everything in the Bible. That ought to cause a little kerfuffle amongst the biblical idolaters, literalists and fundamentalists.

Paul sounds more like a Unitarian/Universalist than a street corner preacher.

Paul starts with the concept of the creator God, upon which they can all agree, and begins to build a connection from there. One of those being that "We are all God's offspring." That is the starting point for Paul – that we are all God's offspring – offspring of the God in whom we all "*live and move and have our being.*"

We are all God's offspring! Oh, I don't know, do you think there might be something we could learn from Paul in dealing with others who are different from us?

What is your starting point when you share your faith with others? Is it: "We are all God's offspring"?

Or...

"YOU'RE A SINNER!"?

"You need a Savior!"?

"Repeat this prayer... "?

Those last three comments are spoken from a place of dominance, and the arrogance of the majority. I think we can learn quite a bit from not only what Paul is saying, but his stance in saying it.

The Church today is struggling because it has always seen itself as a majority community. And when we find ourselves losing membership, we grasp for ways to return to the majority, because the majority can wield power and authority. But the problem with believing in a Christian majority is that we begin to believe the values of the majority are Christian values... whether they be economic, political, or moral. We begin to equate the two. And that is dangerous for both society and Christianity.

Sooo, what if we understood ourselves as a minority movement? Whose goal is not to be the majority, but to be faithful followers, faithful disciples?

What if we de-coupled ourselves from the Constantinian captivity we've been in for the last 1,700 years? How would that change our perspective?

What if we see the world not as something we need to dominate, but as something to connect to? What if we see ourselves not as needing to impose our worldview on others, but finding places of connection to begin to tell our story and hear their stories?

Look, Jesus calls us to be the leaven in the bread, not the whole loaf. The whole loaf is “... **the God in whom we live and move and have our being.**”

Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth, not a salt lick.

But that is how the Church has often operated... forcing people to come to it, think like it, and worship like it... rather than sprinkling itself into the other's world.

It is the seduction of being in the majority. The seduction of being in power. The seduction of wanting to be the final authority. We have always told people they have to detach from their ways, their cultures, their belief systems... and become like us.

But salt is a flavoring. Salt brings out the goodness in other things. It doesn't overpower them. When salt becomes the dominant flavor, it ruins everything. When our talk about our beliefs, our ways, our systems becomes dominant, we too ruin everything.

And leaven is an agent, that brings fullness to its world and keeps it from falling flat.

So what does it mean to be the salt of the earth and not a salt lick? How do we understand the Church as something other than a house of worship (salt lick) which people have to come to, to receive what we have to offer?

We can't sit on our fannies and expect people to come to us (salt lick). We must meet others where they are at. Flavor their lives where they are at. We must connect to others in their language and concepts.

It's why I love reading Asian theologians and learning from them. Because they live in cultures where Christianity has never been the dominant religion, the majority.

Kosuke Koyama, in his book *Water Buffalo Theology*, speaks to this issue in clear terms. Koyama was a Japanese missionary to northern Thailand, and his struggle was to make the gospel real to those people in their context and culture. His fear was that he would bring HIS gospel to them, rather than let the gospel take root in northern Thailand soil. His fear sprung from what he had seen American Christianity do in Japan – bring an **imperialistic** Christianity rather than an **incarnational** one.

Koyama writes:

*On my way to the country church, I never fail to see a herd of water buffaloes grazing in the muddy paddy field. This sight is an inspiring moment for me. Why? Because it reminds me that the people to whom I am to bring the gospel of Christ spend most of their time with these water buffaloes in the rice field. They remind me to discard abstract ideas, and to use objects that are immediately tangible. “Sticky-rice,” “banana,” “pepper,” “dog,” “rainy season,” “leaking house,” “cock-fighting,”*

“stomachache” – these are meaningful words for them. “This morning,” I say to myself, “I will try to bring the gospel of Christ through the medium of cock-fighting.”

He continues:

*I decided to subordinate great theological thoughts, like those of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, to the intellectual and spiritual needs of the farmers. My theology in northern Thailand must begin with the need of the farmers and not with the great thoughts (of others) ...*

*Do I mean to say that I dare to give priority to the farmers over Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth in my theological thinking? Yes. The reason is simple. God has called me to work here in northern Thailand, not in Italy or Switzerland. And I am working with neither a Thomas Aquinas nor a Karl Barth. God commanded me to be a neighbor to these farmers.*

And C.S. Song, a Taiwanese Christian who taught at The Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA, wrote this:

*Religious traditions tend to alienate strangers. Ecclesiastical structures become walls surrounding faithful believers. Doctrinal precision creates heretics and infidels. Even expressions of religious devotion in worship and liturgy makes people alien to one another.*

Imperial Christianity or incarnational Christianity? It isn't just a question for missionaries, but for us in our daily walk of faith. Do we trust others with the gospel? Can we honor those whose experience may be different from ours, but nonetheless brings about hope and transformation in them... love, grace, and mercy in them?

Do we seek to impose our Christianity on others or let the gospel incarnate itself in them?

Matt Skinner puts it well as he summarizes this passage:

*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 recognize it as good news for us, if it weren't? [Otherwise] we'd all be gnostics, which would be insufferable. Take my word for it.*

Paul challenges our modern-day, majority Christian paradigm that seeks to dominate, impose, and prescribe. And we in the Lutheran tradition would do well to realize that 21<sup>st</sup> century people have very little interest in how God was described or worshipped in the 1500's. And that maybe we should seek to describe God in 21<sup>st</sup> century terms, rather than prescribe God in 16<sup>th</sup> century language.

Paul words cause us to consider: Are we all God's offspring, or are we not?

Is there one God in whom we all live and move and have our being, or not?

Paul's answer is a clear and unambiguous “YES we are and YES there is!”

This is Paul's starting point... and my ending point.

**Amen.**

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## **Opening Song**

### **Be Still**

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

### **Calm Me Lord**

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.  
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.  
Let all the tumult within me cease.  
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

### **Come Drink of Living Water**

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

## **The Meal**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

## **Benediction**

### **The Lord Bless You and Keep You**

(National Lutheran Choir, Peter C. Lutkin)

The Lord bless you and keep you.  
The Lord lift his countenance upon you... and give you peace.  
The Lord make his face to shine upon you... and be gracious unto you.  
The Lord be gracious unto you. Amen.