

Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

A Mission Trip Way of Life

Acts 16:16-34

INTRODUCTION TO THE READING FROM ACTS

Barbara Lynch: Before this part of the story, Paul has gone from place to place with other disciples to spread the news of Jesus' resurrection. While in Beroea, they ran into trouble from the authorities and his fellow missionaries shuffled him out of the city to the coast as far as Athens, Greece.

READING:

Jean: 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 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. 18 Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babblers 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.) 19 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? 20 It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Barbara: 22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 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. 24 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, 25 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. 26 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, 27 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. 28 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..."

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.'

Jean: 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.

SERMON:

When I started here at TriCon three months ago, members told me: "Wait 'til you experience the Mission Trip service; it's a highpoint at TriCon." They were *so* right! The Youth Mission Trip lived up to its reputation: the ministry they accomplished in Black Mesa, the bonds that were built between the youth, the awareness they raised about diversity, service, and the spiritual transcendence of it all.

While Bob and I were reviewing the lectionary bible readings and preparing for the sermons coming after April 30, it occurred to me that **the church – the church universal – ought to exhibit a mission trip way of life. Christians are called to a mission trip way of being and living in the world.**

I'm using "mission trip" as a metaphor for the fact that people of faith venture into the unknown all the time, and ought to do so with the message and ministry of God's love in Jesus Christ in their minds, on their lips, in their outstretched hands, and in their very way of moving in the world. In other words, the nature and purpose of the church is to go into new and unfamiliar "places," embodying the good news that God's love leads to resurrected life!

Moreover, moving into the unknown or an unfamiliar place means *more* than traveling a great distance, to a far off land. Entering a place that's new to us may actually be wherever we already are right now, personally facing a trial or transformation, or as the poet puts it: "in a country where the lights are low and the way is hard to find."

A mission trip way of life. What would this look like?

There are scholars who study missiology, and Steve Bevans has identified six different models of Christian mission, along with their strengths and weaknesses. During his mission trip story April 30, Nick Charde, one of our seniors, illustrated *one* of these when he told us: "we were reminded at the beginning of the trip [that] we were not bringing God to Black Mesa, because God was already there." Bevans labels this mission model "Anthropological."¹ It could also be tagged "Biblical," since in our Acts 17 reading I believe we see Paul exercising this same approach.

In *his* mission trip way of life, **the first thing Paul did when he arrived in Athens was to look around.** He found out where the synagogue was; he gazed upon the incredible architecture. Across probably weeks and maybe months, he walked among the gardens, along the roads, through their cemeteries, went daily to the marketplace, and wandered through their public squares where the monuments to great moments and the statues of their gods stood. Apparently

¹Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004). Chapter five describes the "anthropological" model. The other models are "translation," "praxis," "counter-cultural," "synthetic," and "transcendental."

he also read up on Greek culture, learned of their poets, their philosophers, and made connections to his own upbringing and faith. Paul's mission practice of "looking around" appeals to me because it fits with my academic discipline as a practical theologian and with one of my spiritual practices of taking walks around Concord.

Furthermore, Paul's looking around led him to reflect theologically. When he found that statue to the "unknown god," he got past his initial disgust with all their religious idols and came to a reaffirmation of the bigness of God – "the living God who made heaven and earth!" In other words, in his looking around Athens, Paul looked for *God already there*, and doing so expanded his own awareness and experience of God! Similarly, in *his* story, Nick went on to point out the awe-inspiring beauty of Black Mesa, along with the obvious poverty – a beauty that *we* in our affluence tend not to see here in our backyards! **So a mission trip way of life looks for the big God, already present and at work in the new 'place,' wherever it is, thereby enriching our own experience of the Divine.**

The second thing that Paul looked for in Athens was opportunities to dialogue with those that were different from him. Paul went to *both* the synagogue, where he was sure to find a familiar religious vibe and Jews who spoke in his mother tongue, *and* he went to the agora and the areopagus – the Greek centers of commerce and civic decision-making. Paul was *not* a quietist Christian, one that turns away from engagement in the world. He thrived in conversation with those of different classes and upbringings, with Epicureans and Stoics, those of pagan religions and no religion. Paul sought to dialogue *even* with those that called him a "babbler" under their breath. Now it would not be accurate, I think, to portray Paul as a paragon of modern ideals of democratic pluralism, nor was he a proponent of a "melting pot" diversity, but he wanted and practiced respectful and robust dialogue with all. The word that Luke, the author of Acts, uses for Paul's dialogue with the Athenians is "symballo," meaning a collegial exchange of ideas, honest and not hostile.

Through this exchange, Paul was able to affirm the Greek concept of a God "in whom we live and move and have our being," of whom we are "offspring" – children – *and* at the same time convey how such a parental God is of necessity involved in the world, in our cities, and in flesh and blood living. Since Paul had gained a hearing from Athen's leaders, he shared the story of Jesus, getting across to them that this big God, mysterious and unknown, *wants* to be known by us, to be in relationship with us, came in Jesus Christ to live among us and feel the limits, as well as to lift us up. Paul also dared to proclaim the high stakes that this Resurrected One is ultimately also our judge.

You see, Paul was not marketing God in order to seal a deal or make the sale. In fact, the book of Acts is not at all ashamed that only two named converts came forth from his faith conversations there! I submit that Paul looked for dialogue with those different from him for three reasons: 1) because that's what Jesus did and what God was doing with humanity through Jesus, 2) because it might lead to *further* dialogue, as it did with those in Athens who said to Paul: "We'll hear you again about this," and 3) because Paul had discovered that dialogue like this helped *him* grow in Christ. For growth in faith doesn't happen when we are continually in isolation, or by avoiding controversy, or by always being with the same people who like and do the same things as us. Instead, our growing edges come to bloom and our love grows by listening and talking with those who have a different slant or even disagree. **So a mission trip way of life looks for and grows through dialogue with difference.**

I know of pastors that set up 'office hours' at coffee shops in the town center, sometimes with a sign on the table: "the pastor is in," leading eventually to connections, conversations, and mutual discovery. This is a mission trip way of life. A mission trip way of life also looks like *you* at an Evolve Event where you hear and share diverse perspectives with fellow TriConers. A mission trip way of life looks like our missionary friends, Rick and Pat Tucker-Spier, who served in Japan at the same time we were in France. They had formal mission responsibilities at the Kyoto Peace Center, but they also lived their faith in their neighborhood, so that when they left, their Japanese neighbors, who didn't know the word for "Christian," commended them by saying: "Farewell, and thank you for being *Christ* to us!"