

Sixth Sunday Of Easter – Keli Pennington

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

I love a good story. I love hearing one—just ask my parents, who read and re-read me countless books growing up. I love telling them, usually with as much drama as it allows. I love stories so much, I wrote my senior honors thesis on it, and anyone who's written a thesis knows that's commitment!

Stories are a way we communicate our thoughts and life experiences to help others and ourselves make sense of the world around us. There are certain stories, though, that have impacted us in such a way that we repeatedly tell them to emphasize their value and truth, not only for our own lives, but, usually, in a more global sense as well. As Christians, we recognize that we have a central story. We orient our lives around the story. We live out the story. We share the story with others.

I think we see Paul lean into this storytelling life in the passage from Acts today. Paul weaves this beautiful Gospel story in such a compelling way for his original listeners, as well as speaking truth to us today. Paul's story is set in Athens, and while the city was no longer in its heyday, it was still a cultural and intellectual center for its time. Paul had been walking around the city marketplace for a couple days preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And the people of Athens, being the intellectuals that they were, wanted to know more about these new ideas, this new philosophy, even though they were pretty sure it was just nonsense. So they called Paul before the Areopagus. Now, the Areopagus was kind of like a city council where debates were held and verdicts were reached. It was held in an open-air forum just west of the city, and this is where today's lectionary passage picks up.

Paul gives us the perfect example of being ready to give a defense of his faith with gentleness and respect, like our epistle lesson describes. Paul takes off his Pharisaic hat and begins to tell a story that the Greeks will understand. Rather than immediately quoting all of the Old Testament passages that he knows so well, or calling down fire and brimstone, discrediting and shaming the Athenians and their pagan practices—and let's be honest, we know Paul has that in him—instead he begins to draw them in, saying that he has paid close attention to their religiousness, even their respectful recognition of the altar to the unknown God so as to not erroneously overlook any other possible deity. He seemingly affirms their quest to make space for the unknown God. But just as he has drawn them in, he flips the conversation. He says, I know this God that is so beyond all of the other gods, you can't even name it. He is our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. Paul just keeps reeling them in, supporting his claims by drawing on Greek poetry that his listeners would have held dear and immediately recognized. Then he wraps it up with “Repent and believe.” After our lectionary passage, it goes on to say some mocked him, some were skeptical but wanted to hear more, and others believed and left the Areopagus to join Paul on the walk with Christ.

Paul found the right imagery and language and reclaimed it to enter the Athenian's worldview and respectfully but powerfully speak words of truth into it. The [Nairobi Statement on Worship](#)

and Culture reminds us that the Gospel is contextual, cross-cultural, transcultural, and counter-cultural, and I think we see Paul draw on all four of these ways in which culture and the Gospel interact. First, the Gospel message is contextual. Paul hits this one out of the park, appealing to the Athenians' logic, their religiousness, their quest for truth, their texts and poetry, when it would have been much easier to give the same sermon he gave to those in the synagogue earlier in the chapter. The fact that Paul was at both a synagogue and the Areopagus shows that the Gospel is cross-cultural and not just for one specific people group nor limited to that people group's understanding or culture. The Gospel's cross-cultural nature springs from the fundamental and universal need for a relationship with our Maker, Redeemer, and Sustainer which reaches far beyond culture to unite us as one in Christ. But Paul calls for repentance, reminding the Athenians that the Gospel is counter-cultural and radically different than their lifestyle.

Paul practices this technique throughout the New Testament, being *all things to all people*, as he says in 1st Corinthians 9:22. Numerous early Church Fathers commented on how Paul drew on Christ's pattern of empathy to accomplish this seemingly impossible task, and that without it, it would have come across as a fake act. And I think we can all recall a time when someone tried to be "cool" to relate with us and it had the opposite effect. This act of cross-cultural storytelling through Christ's empathy and love is not limited to just Paul; we see it throughout history. I'm reminded of the Celtic cross, which blends the circular symbol of the pagan sun with the cross of Christ. I think our initial reaction is to pull away from things of this nature, fearing syncretism, and I can understand that to an extent, but there's also an opportunity to reclaim the story with the power of the Gospel. Going back to the Celtic cross: while it may have linked the pagan god to Christ as an initial appeal, it served as an opportunity to tell the story of how Christ gives true life in comparison to the sun. Others reclaimed the symbol by telling the story of how placing the cross on top of the circle represents Christ's supremacy over the pagan sun. Finding the Gospel in an unlikely way, one that may even make you question it, is still a story reclaimed and retold for the glory of God.

Let me make this a little more modern by telling you about a worship experience Willem and I had last weekend. We were in a stadium with over 18,000 other young adults, diverse ethnically as well as socio-economically. We raised our hands recognizing that God blesses us in numerous ways and that He is great. We prayed that the Spirit would give us strength to run the race for Him all of our days. We sang the name of Jesus with a Gospel choir. It was beautiful and deeply spiritual experience and was at a Chance the Rapper concert. For those of you who may not be familiar with Chance, he's a "secular" rap artist who does not hide his Christian faith and incorporates it frequently into his music. He practically preaches at his concert and the crowd responds. I was blown away by how many people reacted most strongly during his songs about faith, especially since some of his music is a little racy and starts leaning towards the stereotypical categories we tend to place rap, hip-hop, and R&B into. But something about Chance hits a nerve with people. The same crowd that listened to and enjoyed the rap music that glorifies womanizing, drugs, and alcohol that played before the concert was the same crowd that poured their heart into singing "How Great Is Our God." I didn't and still don't quite understand what was going on, other than to recognize that something holy was happening—that God was present and was drawing people closer to Him, myself included, through Chance's testimony and

music. The Gospel was being preached in an unlikely place to a group of people that may not have understood it in any other way. Praise be to God.

We see from Paul's story that a culturally aware message doesn't mean it's 100% effective. And we also know that being in tune with or even aware of all of the various cultures and sub-cultures that surround us is hard. Having the courage to boldly share the Gospel with anyone, let alone those who are different than us, or look down on us, or who we look down on, is hard. Living the Gospel is hard, but it's the story we keep coming back to.

I've come to expect the unexpected in both Scripture and in the Christian life. In the middle of our 1st Peter passage, it references Christ going to hell and proclaiming the Gospel to the DEAD, the people who already lost their shot at redemption, the people we would least expect. But Jesus is there, sharing the Good News of the Gospel. No person, no culture, no situation is too far from the grace of God, and that's a story I want to tell all of the days of my life.