

Textbook Mission: Sympathetic Engagement

-Lesslie Newbigin was Christian missionary from Great Britain in the mid-20th century. He served in India with the Anglican Church for forty years. And when Newbigin returned home in the 1970s, what he discovered was surprising: his beloved Britain had become an even *more* difficult mission field than he had experienced in India.

‘England,’ he wrote, ‘is a pagan society, and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough *form* of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.’

Newbigin’s realization challenged how Christians in the West had understood things for seventeen hundred years. So-called ‘Christian nations’ had supposed that mission was about sending missionaries overseas to non-Christian mission fields.

But no. What he recognized in England and the West were societies that – while they might still sing ‘God Save the Queen’ or ‘God Bless America,’ while they might still drive past brick churches in the heart of downtown, or get Sunday off from work – had lost a strong sense of identity and purpose as apprentices of Jesus sent with good news. Which means that the society all *around* Christians in the West was rapidly *becoming* their mission field. And it was a tough field at that, because of this lingering sense that growing up in a so-called Christian nation made you Christian.

No longer could congregations think of their mission in terms of raising some funds and sending missionaries to places like India – *especially* if what they were thinking of mission was all mixed up with colonialism. No. The churches would need to recover their Roots in the gospel. They *themselves* would need to become humble ambassadors for Christ. And their mission field would be the friends, colleagues, neighbors and communities right outside their doors.

So. Say we who are gathered here are imperfect but growing apprentices of Jesus - that it’s in the risen Christ that we are increasingly finding our true identity and mission. And say that American society as a whole is becoming less and less understanding of an authentic Christian faith and witness. How will we think about serving as ambassadors of Jesus’ life-changing grace and truth to our own community?

The Scripture we’re reading today tells of Paul’s cross-cultural encounter with the people of Athens, Greece. And I’m going to suggest that it has some really crucial insights into what it means for us to serve as persons sent to bear witness to the hope of Christ right here in this mission field we call home.

[Read Acts 17.16-31, *The Message*]

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. He discussed it with the Jews and other like-minded people at their meeting place. And every day he went out on the streets and talked with anyone who happened along. He got to know some of the Epicurean and Stoic intellectuals pretty well through these conversations. Some of them dismissed him with sarcasm: “What an airhead!” But others, listening to him go on about Jesus and the resurrection, were intrigued: “That’s a new slant on the gods. Tell us more.”

¹⁹⁻²¹ These people got together and asked him to make a public presentation over at the Areopagus, where things were a little quieter. They said, “This is a new one on us. We’ve never heard anything quite like it. Where did you come up with this anyway? Explain it so we can understand.” Downtown Athens was a great place for gossip. There were always people hanging around, natives and tourists alike, waiting for the latest tidbit on most anything.

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.

²⁴⁻²⁹ “The God who made the world and everything in it, this Master of sky and land, doesn’t live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him, as if he couldn’t take care of himself. He makes the creatures; the creatures don’t make him. Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually *find* him. He doesn’t play hide-and-seek with us. He’s not remote; he’s *near*. We live and move in him, can’t get away from him! One of your poets said it well: ‘We’re the God-created.’ Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for *us*, does it?

“God overlooks it as long as you don’t know any better—but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he’s calling for a radical life-change. 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.”

-This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray: Lord we seek your life-giving Word *to* us. And we seek your life-giving Word *through* us. By the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

-So. I myself was once a Greek. When I was in college, I remember sitting upstairs in the student union in front of a little table covered with newspapers. I was reading a book for one of my classes. My fraternity was Sigma Phi Epsilon. And that day I was wearing a sweatshirt with my Greek letters across the front. I must have looked like a target nonbeliever. A worshiper of all the idols of fraternity life. Because as I’m sitting there, this guy approaches me. He says he wants to

share Jesus Christ with me. I tell him I'm a Christian. He smiles knowingly. Another shallow fraternity boy who thinks he's a Christian because his parents took him to church a few times.

He pulls up a chair. He asks me not a single question about my life. And he begins a monologue about the four spiritual laws, aided by a little green book that shows very clearly the deep chasm separating God from all of Greek life on campus. I sit across from this guy. I'm actually impressed with his courage to seek me out. I'm actually inclined toward the conversation we might have had. But I'm also growing annoyed that he's chosen to learn nothing about me. Annoyed at his presupposition that I've experienced no brushes with the mystery of God. Annoyed that he's sought no common ground. Annoyed that he's made the independent judgment that my Greek soul needs saving, when (given the opportunity) I would have readily agreed that it did.

-Paul approaches Greeks differently. When he gets to Athens, he's admittedly not impressed. He's a Jewish Christian with the commandments written on his heart. And this city is a wasteland "full of idols." He steps into both the synagogue and the marketplace to initiate exchanges with people of very different worldviews. The Athenians are famously curious. Which leads Paul to the Areopagus. It's a rocky hill near the Acropolis and Parthenon. It's where the Athenians spend hours turning over questions of philosophy and religion. At one level the Areopagus was Athens' version of the Internet. And it turns out that much like in our own society, people there could seem more interested in what's *new* than what's *true*.

But here's something crucial for Christian witness, I think. Paul begins this conversation at the Areopagus by demonstrating his *respect* for the persons he addresses. He approaches them with *sympathy* for their search. He *credits* their life experience. It's a priceless opening statement: 'Athenians, I see how extremely *religious* you are in every way. ²³For 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.'

The Greeks may live among statues and shrines to many gods that Paul considers false, but he will consider them *truth seekers*. Their *impulse*, their *religious yearning* to worship, he will count as admirable, even if the *objects* of their worship may be, in his opinion, misplaced. Their altar to an unknown God he will choose to view as their longing to know the One who may yet be revealed to them.

More, did you hear how, even in articulating his different view of their hope, Paul demonstrates *humility*? He's been walking through their city. He's been observing their culture carefully. He's read their literature. He's listened and gotten to know them. And so he chooses to take this sympathetic view toward their culture that just may speak to their deepest desires.

In fact, Paul quotes no Scripture (which would hold no sway for his audience, right?) Instead he quotes their own *poetry* to point to the God he proclaims. It's pagan poetry. Even poetry

originally directed to Zeus. 'In him we live and move and have our being.' Paul is here speaking favorably of how other religions may offer hints of the Christian hope. He is claiming not that all philosophies and religions are the same, but that all truth is *God's* truth. He credits the impulse of Athens to look upon the creation and offer praise. And he will make these connections with their personal experience to point them further. He wants them to know the life and freedom and joy of the Christ he's come to know.

-Now think about this. Paul is not *isolating*. He's not retreating into his own Christian enclave to hide out from an unbelieving culture. And Paul is not *accommodating*. He's not saying, well, idolaters will be idolaters! Rather, he's choosing a *third way*. A sympathetic, winsome approach. He's choosing to see in the many idols of Athens the people's desire for the God who can give them life. He's looking below the surface for a longing deep in their humanity to know the grace and truth of Christ.

Can you see the longing for Christ in the idolatries of our age? In the food, video games, pornography, tobacco, internet, sweets, work, drugs, social media, conspiracy theories, Netflix, political fighting, alcohol – and so much more?

And will you approach your own friends, co-workers, family, neighbors, acquaintances with Paul's sympathetic respect?

The implication of Paul in Athens is that if we look and listen, we may discover that, at core, *everyone* is searching for their true belonging, purpose and hope. That *even* (and maybe especially) in their various idolatries they (and we) are seeking to fill holes that can only be filled by Christ's love. That they and we are seeking comfort for wounds that are only healed by God's grace and truth. And what we who follow Jesus have been called to do – as a calling and pleasure - is to humbly, respectfully, winsomely share the source of our hope.

-So how *do* we listen for what our neighbors are *really* longing for? How do we learn their stories and wounds? How do we pay attention to who they *are* and humbly engage them – not as projects, but as persons – with the source of our own hope?

Paul was about the work of *cross-cultural ministry*. So are we. Paul was engaging Greek culture. We're engaging American culture, Missoula culture, youth culture, sports culture, Native American culture, outdoorsman culture, politically charged culture, advantaged culture, consumer culture, numbing culture, sexualized culture, immigrant culture, addicted culture... How do we do it? We recognize our *own* idols. We invite conversations. We listen to stories. We don't pretend to know everything. We look for people's true longing. We care about persons. We connect with people's search for meaning. And we never shy away from sharing the story and love of Jesus that we've discovered.

-What might that look like as we engage persons coming from infinite stories to the question of abortion? What might that look like as we enter into relationship with Native people who have

known a history of Christian abuse by way of boarding school? What might that look like as we encounter those seeking spiritually rich lives that matter for justice but who have no expectation that the Christian Church could have anything to offer to that search?/

-What if Paul had walked into the student union to see a college guy in a fraternity sweatshirt reading a book? Rather than letting the idols that likely populate this guy's life create awkward distance, wouldn't he have taken a sympathetic view? Wouldn't he have seen a truth seeker? A young man on a journey? A person with a story. Someone searching for intimacy and adventure, for belonging and purpose and hope? Wouldn't he have asked questions that established connection? Wouldn't he have discovered the ways that this young man's own yearnings might incline him toward the Christ he had hope to share?

-When Presbyterians hear the word evangelism, they often get the creeps because they imagine my experience at the student union. Implicit judgment. Embarrassing monologue. But the word evangelism means 'good message or good news.' How do we share the truth and grace of Christ in a way that becomes surprising good news right here in our own community? How do we become ambassadors of Jesus right here in this mission field?

-It turns out there was another guy who came to talk with me when I was in college. Dusty Ellington. He was a sophomore or junior with Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. Dusty came to my freshman dorm room in my first weeks of school. He sat down. He asked me about myself. He found out I had been part of a Christian youth group in high school. He heard about my shame at withdrawing from the US Air Force Academy. He listened to me talk about my lonely year between high school and college. About my hunger to discover whether I could really depend on God to get me through. Dusty encouraged me to invest in Christian community. He gave me information on a number of Christian groups, not just his own. He told me it didn't matter which group I might end up in, but that from his own experience, it seemed the important thing was pursuing my faith in Christ while in college. And I did just that.

Let's Pray: Lord, we pray that we might take people seriously, that we might see sympathetically into their hearts, that we might have courage to engage people respectfully, and to point them to you Lord, you who meet all people in the depths of their longing for your truth and grace, your belonging, purpose and hope.

Amen.