

“Some Guidance about Flexibility and Adaptation”

(Dramatic Sermon)

Acts 17:22-34

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(entering) Good morning, it is good to be with you, even in this very strange way, through this “technology,” I think you call it. It is very strange for me to address a room with no one in it, though I must say that I might prefer an empty room over some of the crowds I have addressed. I have been ridiculed, beaten and put in prison for my words and beliefs. I trust that this will not happen today, though I’m not sure what will. I am trying to trust those who have brought me here.

Apparently, your regular preacher – odd fellow, I must say, long hair these days – apparently, he has found it a bit strange to preach in this way too, so much so that he needed a break and thus invited me to be here today. And I am happy to be. I don’t get many invitations these days. Some scholars think of me as the church’s first theologian, but quite a few people only remember some things I said about women or marriage, or they focus on issues I could have said more about like slavery. I’m not even sure I said some things attributed to me.

But, oh well, the past is the past, and I am here today, and while this situation is different, I can assure you I have spent a lifetime – more than one it seems at times – adapting to different situations. I have spoken to individuals and large crowds, to hostile audiences and loving fellow believers, to political and religious leaders, jailers and fellow inmates, anyone and everyone who would listen, and I have found that the key to proclaiming the Gospel and living it out faithfully lies in flexibility and a willingness to adapt. So, I’ll try to do that today.

The passage you have read from Acts 17 actually provides a wonderful case study for what I am talking about because in this situation I had to be flexible and adapt my words to the context in which I found myself. Though my calling was to share the Good News of Jesus with all people, most people I spoke to early on were of Jewish

background and thus had a good bit in common with me. I could count on them knowing the stories of our faith, the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, as you know it. The people of Athens, even the Areopagus, the city council, were not Jewish. They seemed to have little in common with me; they did not know our stories.

So, I couldn't assume any knowledge about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses and Miriam; Ruth and Deborah; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Amos; David and Solomon... none of it... You can't tell a story about Opie and Aunt Bee to people who have never seen the Andy Griffith show. I couldn't assume any knowledge of my faith.

Furthermore, while my people would have at least been ashamed of having made an idol of anything in life, and would never have allowed an idol to be seen, these people had idols everywhere, monuments to gods they revered. Frankly, it disgusted me, but it was a part of their culture. So, while I could not ignore this issue staring me in the face, nor could I begin by attacking what these people valued most. As someone has said, you attract more flies with sugar than vinegar.

So, since I wanted the Athenians to hear the Good News and respond in faith, as opposed to simply telling them I was right and they were wrong – which I have been accused of doing on other occasions - I adapted my approach. I began with an affirmation of the good I saw in these people, their religious perspective on life. I even quoted one of their great thinkers who referred to God as the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

Some might think I was being disingenuous, saying one thing and tweeting another, but I was not. I was trying to find some common ground so that I could connect with these people. I was following the counsel of 1 Peter 3, defending the faith yet with gentleness and reverence. And I really could see good in them, as I could in all people.

They had not received the fullness of light God reveals in Christ. A great thinker of your time, Thomas Merton, once said that “as a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or piece of paper, so the mystery of Christ in the Gospel concentrates the rays of God's light and fire to a point that sets fire to the spirit of man/woman (*New Seeds of*

Contemplation, p. 150).” The people of Athens had not been transformed by that light, but God shines light all over the world, and they had been exposed to some of it. I could genuinely affirm that.

You might begin here in your current struggles. Affirm the good things about this time, the things you are learning, the things you are still able to do. You don’t have to deny the things you are missing to notice the things you have – more time with those closest to you, more time to reflect on your faith, the resources of technology and the blessings of this time, like medicine. In my time, when there were great plagues, everyone just got sick and died, they died. You have hope at least. And there are so many ways you can remain connected to each other, love each other, express your love for God, including this way.

But I also might suggest – I’ll put it this way since I am being gentle and reverent – I might *suggest* that you begin any attempt to share your faith with people outside the church by affirming the good in them. I assume you will try to share your faith with outsiders because how else will they know about Jesus and what would be the point of sharing only with those who already believe; but *when* you speak with outsiders, you might as well be in Athens among the Areopagus. People in your time do not know the stories of our faith, they have many beliefs and practices you might find distasteful, idolatrous even, but don’t begin there. You won’t persuade anyone by insulting their mother, by tempting them to cuss and spit before they know anything about you.

The Athenians already called me a babblers, a picker of seeds, someone who grabbed ideas here and there and tried to make sense of them. They already thought the very idea of resurrection, something central to our faith, was ridiculous. I didn’t need to give them another reason to tune me out, I wanted them to listen. In like manner, outsiders will have preconceived ideas about you. Don’t confirm the worst of their assumptions. Seek common ground, find something to affirm.

But, of course, while I began by affirming the Athenians, I didn’t end there. I shared the distinctive qualities of our faith, including the Good News about Jesus, like always. I told them about the God who is

the Creator of all things. I told them God is not to be confused with any part of creation. And I told them that while God had been patient with people and had allowed for the limits of human understanding, God expected people to change and acknowledge who God really is. Most of all, I told them about a man who was key to understanding God, a man God appointed as judge, a man God raised from the dead – Jesus.

They responded in various ways, as I suspected they would. Some scoffed at the very mention of resurrection, as I anticipated. It is not an easy concept to embrace and Epicureans simply did not believe in any afterlife while Stoics believed that at death the soul joined the larger “world soul” but there was no personal existence. I knew Jesus’ resurrection would present a challenge to these people, but it lies at the very heart of our faith. I could not leave it out of my message.

But not everyone scoffed. Some people said they wanted to hear more which I considered a wonderful response. Sometimes it is the best response, especially for people who come from a place in their experience and thought that is radically different from ours. Genuine belief and transformation will take time and more than words, a humble example of what it means to follow Jesus.

Yet, while some scoffed at my message, even after all my efforts to find common ground, and some wanted to hear more, some believed and joined me, including Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others. Some point out that there is no record of a large church having been formed in Athens and thus conclude that this sermon was a dud; it should not be considered as a positive example.

I may be a bit biased here – OK, I am biased – but no other approach yielded big numbers. In some contexts, faith must grow slowly. And most importantly, it’s not all about numbers, it’s about genuine faith. Numbers can be very deceiving.

As the third century BCE Greek philosopher Diogenes once said, “Discourse on virtue and they pass by in droves. Whistle and dance the shimmy and you’ve got a crowd.” I never was a very good dancer, as anyone can tell you. But I know a bit about discourse and virtue. And I know how easy it is to stir up a crowd, and how little it really means that you have done so. But here I go quoting another one of those Greek

thinkers. The orthodox police will have my head if the Romans don't get it first!

But here's the point. I proclaimed the faith as boldly as I knew how — gently and reverently, respecting the culture and life experience of my hearers — but boldly. They processed my message in different ways because of the great distance between our worldviews, but they listened, some believed, and some needed time to mull it over, but the seeds had been planted for their faith to grow. I trusted God with the rest. I had done what I could. It required flexibility and a willingness to adapt, but people came to faith, lives were changed.

So, this is my counsel to you in this strange time and beyond it. Be flexible, be willing to adapt. Take seriously the people you meet everywhere, get to know and honor their experience, find common ground — it always exists — and affirm what you can in others. Share your faith in Jesus, what you know personally, what you believe and have experienced. And then, trust God with the rest. In some contexts, much of your culture right now — which is different for some of you, I know — the response will be varied and slow. But it's not all about numbers, it's about faithfulness, it's about trusting God, not only with your life but with the church.

Let's just be honest. If it were up to people, especially people like you and me, the church would have died long ago. But it's not up to us, at least not us alone. We matter, God uses us, we are called to be faithful, but we are not called to be successful, as Mother Teresa, a great saint of your time, once said. Success, as the world defines it, for the church is an idolatrous concept — quite popular, I know, like the altar to an unknown god in Athens — but idolatrous nonetheless.

Be faithful, share the Good News, love your neighbor and love God, as Jesus commands, and trust God with the rest. God will not leave you alone or orphaned, as Jesus said, nor will God leave the church. God will be with you through all times of duress, and God will be with the church. Amen? Amen!