

Re-membered into new life
*Acts 17:16-34*¹

Today's story finds Paul in Greece, in the city of Athens, a place known for its philosophers, its thinkers, its truth-seekers. V 21 describes those who live there: "Now *all* the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in *nothing* but telling or hearing something new." This may be an exaggerated description but it gives us a sense that this is a place that loves to spend time thinking and reasoning, debating and arguing. People in Athens are looking for explanations for how the world works and what it means to be human and what our relationship is with the spiritual and emotional and physical and eternal worlds.

And here comes Paul, whose life was stopped and turned around by the Resurrected Christ. Paul's conversion, his repentance and transformation, happened because the Resurrected Jesus found him and asked him a question, "Why are you hurting me?" There was no debate, no reasoning, no intellectual discussion. Paul's conversion was full-bodied, his body and being were transformed, his seeing and listening forever altered, his worldview completely changed. Not by reason or argument, but by an encounter...a meeting with the Resurrected Christ.

But Paul was still Paul. Or perhaps more accurately, parts of Saul were still alive in Paul. As Saul he was passionate. His passion and emotions burned...so hot that he was killing everyone who threatened *his* god. Or, again, more accurately, who threatened his *image* of god. His idol was a god that demanded particular obedience, particular ways of thinking, particular practices. His idol, his god, belonged to a particular people, *his* people, in a particular place with a particular history and particular stories. But. When the Resurrected

¹ Inspired by Willie James Jennings' *Acts* Commentary, particularly that he points to God's desire for us in Paul's sermon.

Jesus found him, when he lost his sight...when he could no longer see the idol and image of the god that he himself had created...when he lost his sight, he got a glimpse of the Unknown God, the Living One, the One God.

So, Paul stopped worshiping at the altar of his god, and is now worshiping the Living God, the One God. But the passion that burned in Saul is still burning in Paul. His emotions still run hot. We hear it in the story. He comes to Athens and sees all these idols and his emotions flare. The NRSV says he's "deeply disturbed." But the Greek word suggests something stronger. He's irritated, provoked, his anger has been stirred up. In this moment we see the old Saul, the zealous man ready to defend his God, instinctively ready protect God from all of these threatening idols of other gods.

But what happens next is absolutely Paul. It is Paul trusting the power of the Holy Spirit within him. And with the breath of the Spirit within him, he lets go of his hot impulse to defend God. Instead, he trusts the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ. And the Spirit takes all of that passion, all of his hot anger, and turns it into conversations. Paul goes to the synagogue, to the marketplace, to wherever people are gathering, and engages in conversations. His passion is channeled into words, into ideas and conversations and discussions and debates with any Athenians that he can find. In this city of people who love new ideas and reasoning, Paul joins the conversation, bringing the Resurrected Christ into the center of their ideas and reasoning.

But if we think Paul is doing all the talking, the story suggests otherwise. There is, of course, the amazing sermon. But before that, we hear some of the people in these discussions and debates asking: "What does this babblers want to say?" This is interesting. It suggests that Paul is incoherent. And maybe he was. Or, perhaps he sounded like a child,

afterall, babies and toddlers babble. Were Paul's words so new to them...was the idea of the Resurrected Jesus so new to them that it sounded like gibberish?

But their question has another sense or meaning. "Babbling," in the Greek word, is what birds do, pecking at seeds. Or a chicken, walking around picking, pecking, scavenging their food. Paul is apparently picking at words, poking around to find words. This is fascinating! We have a sense that Paul is learning a language, that he's translating ideas, that he's trying to learn and understand this particular linguistic community. Here he is, in a new place, a new context, with people who have ideas and arguments very different from his own. And he's poking around, trying to translate the Resurrected Christ into their ideas, into their reasoning, into their arguments. And the sermon that follows suggests that, in fact, he learned their language and thinking and ideas.

His sermon is stunning. It may not have been stunning for those who heard it. The responses were mixed. Some believed. Some didn't. Some wanted to hear more. But what I find absolutely fascinating is that he preaches a sermon without naming Jesus, without naming the Christ, without naming *Adonai*, without claiming God as Israel's God. What we hear is a sermon that has been translated into the language of the Athenians, into the ideas and thinking and culture and geography of the Athenians.

Rather than giving the Athenians a new language, rather than changing *their* ideas and thinking and culture, Paul has been listening to them. Fueled by his passion and the Holy Spirit in him, he has been listening and learning to understand them, to understand their ideas and thinking. He begins where they are. He goes *to* them. He speaks *their* language. He doesn't make them come to him and learn his language. Do you see that? This is *very* different than our history of evangelizing and missionaries.

I learned this insight of translating the Gospel into places and cultures from Kwame Bediako, a Ghanaian theologian, in his book, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*. In the book he begins with Jesus, God's Word-made-flesh. And as God's Word, Bediako says, Jesus should be translated into cultures and places. He argues that rather than erasing language and ideas and culture, and replacing them with Jesus, that instead, we are meant to translate Jesus into places and cultures. In his context, for example, the ancestors aren't erased, but Jesus becomes one of the ancestors. Jesus is added into the gathering of the ancestors as the Chief Ancestor.

This is what I find so stunning. The transformation we see in Paul is astonishing. He went from serving a god so jealous that Saul needed to defend him. Not just defend, but kill and destroy in order to protect him. But when Saul, now Paul, was found by the Resurrected Jesus, he discovered a previously Unknown God, the Living God, a God that needs no defense or protection. A vulnerable God. "Why are you hurting me?" A completely vulnerable God. He encountered the One God that cannot and will not be contained or confined by our images and idols, by our shrines and churches, or our best doctrines and understandings and theologies. The Living God, the One God that Paul is preaching to the Athenians...and to us... is, truly, an Unknown God. Because if we are to tell the truth, we mostly worship and serve the god that we know, the one we've created in our own image. An idol that we protect at all costs.

In Paul's sermon to the Athenians, and to us, for surely we need to hear this Word translated into our time and place every bit as much as they did, Paul speaks of a Creator, a God so big and vast and unknowable, a cosmic creating power and presence in the universe. And a God so present and intimate that God's breath gives life to all life, not just to human beings, but gives "life and breath to all things." A God without borders or boundaries. This

Unknown God is not the God of a particular people and place, but God of *all* peoples and *all* places and *all* histories. And while this God is mostly unknown to us, this unknown, Living God, knows us. *We* are known by God, intimately known.

And desired. God desires us. We see and hear God's vulnerable desire in the encounter with Saul, "Why are you hurting me?"

Yes, God is a finding and gathering and re-membering God, but here in Paul's astounding sermon, a sermon that transcends the boundaries of a particular place and religion and culture, Paul gives us a glimpse of the Unknown God, the God he encountered when the Resurrected Jesus stopped him. In v 27 we hear that this Unknown and Unknowable God, Creator of the universe and Breath in all life, created human beings "so that [we] would search for God and perhaps grope for [God] and find [God]."

Truly, this Unknown God that Paul is preaching, the God he encountered in the Resurrected Christ, truly is a God to search for...to grope for...a God to find. It takes courage and humility...grace and patience...to search for God. It is humbling to lose our images and idols of god and to grope for the Unknown God. It takes much courage and grace to become blind to our images and idols and grope for God...the One God, the Living God, the God Who Is/Was/Will Be. It takes patience to wait until we find God...and God finds us. And trust, so much patience and practice to trust...trusting moment by moment...practicing day by day that we are completely and absolutely known and loved by God.

May we, as a community and as individuals, search and grope for God, the Unknown God of the Resurrected Christ.

May it be so.