

## **“I Know, Right?” (Acts 17:22-31)**

### **REVIEW**

On Thursday, my daughter, Georgia, and I went walking in Mounds State Park. The weather was perfect – not too hot, not too cold – and the scenery was amazing. I was taking it all in, when my daughter asked me what my sermon was going to be about this week. Since I knew it was going to spring from last week’s sermon, I had to back up and fill her in on that one before I could tell her what this one was about. I didn’t have my bible with me, I didn’t check my notes, I just talked to my daughter the way I usually did, and soon I was so engrossed in the story that I missed the mounds of Mounds State Park. This is what I said to her, more or less:

“Okay, you remember the apostle Paul, right? Well he got into a lot of trouble preaching about Jesus. He always seemed to step on the toes of the wrong person. In one town, a lady possessed by a spirit that let her predict the future was following him shouting something like, ‘Here are the servants of the Most High God who bring salvation to the world!’ She kept at it and kept at it until Paul gets completely annoyed, whirls on her and says, ‘Spirit, I order you to come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ!’ And the spirit does. The lady is healed! Hallelujah, right? Only she’s the slave of two people who were making money off of her predictions. They were NOT happy. They dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates, and the magistrates threw them in prison. Do you remember this story? The one about Paul and Silas? How they got to prison and started praying and singing hymns? Anyway, I preached about how everyone did what you wouldn’t expect. Paul and Silas were praying and singing. The prisoners didn’t tell them to shut up but actually listened to them. When the earthquake happened and all of the prison doors came open, the prisoners stayed put. Then the prison guard assumed all of the prisoners had escaped and was about to kill himself when Paul said, ‘Dude! Don’t kill yourself! We’re all still here!’”

That’s when my daughter asked me if I was quoting directly from the bible. Um, well, maybe not exactly.

“Anyway! The prison guard asked Paul what he must do to be saved, and eventually the man who was about to kill himself because he thought that the prisoners escaped, let Paul and Silas out of prison himself! The guard and his whole family were baptized. Basically, my message was about how if you behave unexpectedly in faith, even the most terrible situations can lead to salvation.”

Whew! That was the background. Then I was able to tell Georgia what this week’s sermon would be about.

### **PAUL’S EARLY MINISTRY**

Imagine being run out of town for doing what you believed to be God’s will by the people you were sure would accept you. That’s what happened again and again in Paul’s early ministry. He was a Jewish man, who followed a Jewish Messiah, taking the gospel of salvation through Jesus to a Jewish people. I’m fairly certain that when he started out, he expected challenges – after all, he had been a persecutor of the early Jesus followers – but I don’t think he expected rejection. Why else would he have started by taking the gospel to the synagogues? Prior to today’s scripture reading, the author of Acts describes Paul’s routine as he entered each town and the subsequent fall out. For example, Acts 17:1-9, recounts Paul’s arrival in Thessalonica. He went immediately to the synagogue and “on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.’” Some of the Jewish people he talked to were receptive and became Jesus followers themselves and joined Paul and Silas. Others, this scripture tells us, were “jealous”.

I wonder about that word choice. I think “fear” might be a better word to describe what they were feeling. If Jesus wasn’t the Messiah, then the ministry of Paul and Silas was a false one and pulling faithful Jews away from the truth. Fear makes people act in ways they normally wouldn’t, and in this case the Jewish men who rejected the teachings of Paul and Silas recruited some local muscle to whip up a crowd, spread lies about Paul and Silas, and eventually ran them out of town. These opponents to the gospel even went so far as to chase them out of the *next* town too. Finally, Paul and Silas decided that they’d had enough and traveled deep into Gentile territory to the city of Athens.

### **PAUL IN ATHENS**

Athens was a Greek city known for its philosophers and high culture, for example, Acts 17:21 tells us, “All the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” These people

were a curious people and eager to learn. Paul knew this when he rolled into town, but I wonder if he was thinking his reception in Athens would be like it had been in the other towns he had visited. For one thing he broke his routine. Before going to the local synagogue, Paul took a tour of the city and noticed that Athens was full of idols. Acts 17:16 tells us that “he was deeply distressed, and that makes sense because the second of the Ten Commandments is this, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...” When Paul went to the synagogue and to the marketplace to preach, he brought this concern with him. This time it was the Greek philosophers who seemed to reject his message, and they took Paul before the Areopagus – a counsel of Greek guardians of the law.

This story is sounding familiar, isn't it? Yet when Paul arrived at the place of judgment, his accusers acted unexpectedly. There was no riot; Paul and his companions weren't run out of town. Instead they asked a question – a respectful one: “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” The Athenians had heard something new, and they were curious and wanted to understand.

### **SCRIPTURE**

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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, 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. 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, 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. 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.’

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because 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.”

### **PAUL'S "PHILOSOPHY"**

Paul sees the Athenians searching for meaning, looking for something that they haven't yet found, and he gives them God. Not just *a* god, but *the* God, and he does it in a way that meets them where they are. He speaks to them as a philosopher himself; he quotes their own poetry. In short, he speaks their language. When he had their full attention, not just as an oddity but as an insider, he was able to teach them, and he did it by first including them in the family of God, saying *we* are God's offspring, and then calling them to faith in the living God who raised Jesus from the dead.

### **DIFFERENT LANGUAGE THEN**

When I have preached on this scripture in the past, I've focused on how we should imitate Paul by learning the language of those who aren't church people or are outside of our demographic. For example, people my daughter's age grew up using emojis and acronyms to communicate. It started as a way to say as much as possible in a text since typing with your thumbs can be so slow. Here are some examples: For “that's hilarious” type LOL, the acronym for “laugh out loud”. To tell someone to take a chance or to do something that they're unsure of, type YOLO, you only live once. To express astonishment, type OMG, the acronym for “oh my goodness (or oh my god)”. LOL, YOLO, and OMG are now expressed verbally by people in my daughter's generation and younger. If you add that to other words – in English – that mean different things to those folks, like “shook” and “extra,” a person in my generation or older can become totally confused. There is literally a language barrier we must overcome, and it's worth overcoming.

## **DIFFERENT LANGUAGE NOW**

These days, I am aware of a different barrier to communication and to good relationships. Over the last two months, we have been locked down and restricted. Many people are ready to be set free and more than ready to have things return to the way they were before the quarantine. But things may *never* be that way again, and right now businesses – especially in the service industry – are taking things slowly and safely. On Wednesday, for example, I had to use hand sanitizer and have my temperature taken before I could get my hair cut. There are also examples of service employees and customers coming into serious conflict. One of my daughter's friends is a barista at Starbucks and was training a new employee. The rule is that they must stick together like glue – take breaks and lunch at the same time, and so on. They are also required to take 15-minute breaks every so often, and if there are only two people working – the trainer and the trainee in this case – then they have to shut down the kiosk for brief periods during the day. It was on one such break when an irate woman stormed up to my daughter's friend and her trainee and started yelling at them for being lazy and ordering them to get up and make her Frappuccino *right now*.

Perhaps this woman had always been rude and demanding, but the frequency of other people behaving this way today makes me think that it could have been her fear talking in this situation. As I said, our fear can make us do and say things that we never would even *consider* under other circumstances, and in these times – even with restrictions being lifted – fear is all too common. Is it possible the woman's behavior reflected her fear that things would never be the same again? Had she just lost her job and was afraid she wouldn't find another way to support her family? Was it fear making her behave so badly? I think it's very possible, and she isn't alone.

## **IKR**

There is a text acronym that I absolutely love: IKR. It literally means "I know, right?" It means, I've been there, I've experienced that, I know how you feel, I feel the same way. It is a joining up, of showing someone you're on the same side, and that's what Paul did when began talking to the Athenians. He didn't rip them apart for having altars and idols of false gods, he joined up with them by recognizing they were faithful people like himself. He presented himself as a philosopher and quoted their own wisdom. Then Paul offered the true God in place of their unknown god and invited them to believe.

We don't have to work very hard to relate to the feelings of others right now. We've all been experiencing an unprecedented situation for over two months. Nothing like it has happened in the lifetimes of those now living, and it has consumed everything from the way we interact with one another to the advertising we see. This is our advantage as people of faith. We can easily imagine how someone else feels, and because we are people of faith, we can take a deep breath when someone is behaving badly and say, "I know, right?"

## **THE NEXT STEP**

This is your opening. Believe me, the person behaving outrageously does not expect you to listen and be sympathetic. He won't know how to react when you respond with patience, understanding, and love. It will be a shock to the person's system, and that split-second stop will make room for God to work. This may sound crazy, but every opportunity you have to be understanding to someone who is afraid and acting badly is a miracle in the making. And now is an excellent time to look for those chances, because it is likely that we *do* know what they're going through, and because of this God can begin to work. It is our responsibility to create openings for God, and each of us is equipped to do it. We have the advantage of the Holy Spirit working within us, fueling our compassion, giving us strength, and making us brave enough to say, "I know, right?"