

Seeking Common Ground

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22–31

Tammi and I have done a little traveling in our more than thirty years together. Not a lot, nothing too fancy, but enough that I feel blessed by the experiences.

I particularly have enjoyed our travels to cities. I really liked it when we got to walk around in Manhattan, Boston, San Francisco, and London, just walk around and look. I love the variety of buildings, the parks, the shops, the statues and murals and other public art. Of course, it's what I love about Rochester, too, and I do love Rochester. I carry that love to other cities, and take away an appreciation of those places with all they hold.

I hope I haven't looked like the goofy tourist in those other cities. But I just may have. Because I'm looking around at what's around me, instead of looking only where I'm going, as so many city dwellers do, with their faces seeming to tell everyone "I'm on a mission; don't get in my way!"

When I go to a city new to me, I like figuring it out: learning how to navigate it, taking in its character and culture, even its *many* cultures, as most big cities are not one thing but many.

I feel that it's important for me to do this, not only so my visits are enjoyable rather than frustrating, but even more as a means of showing respect to the city and its residents. This is their home. I should try to understand it on its own terms, so they would recognize what I understand, and by extension I should try to understand *them* as *they* really are. Otherwise I'm just a tourist, one of those awful, clueless ones.



Paul, the Apostle of Jesus, the great missionary of the faith, was in the city of Athens. And one day he went around and took in the sights.

What he saw disturbed him. He saw many altars, places of worship out in the open, all of them erected to honor different gods.

That's right: *gods*, plural. For the people of Athens didn't believe in *one* God, the Lord, without beginning and without end, the One maker of the heavens and the earth who had no equals. No, they believed in many gods. And they showed their enthusiasm for idolatry and idols all throughout their city.

This really bothered Paul. It went against one of his deepest convictions, core to his whole outlook: that God had no equals nor would accept no equals, and that those who worshiped God must worship God alone.

Now, this was clearly a big difference between Paul and the Athenians. It also posed a big challenge for him in his work of telling others about Jesus Christ. That's because until this point, most everyone Paul had run into shared something important with him, having in

common this core belief that the Lord God is the only divine being there is, having in common as well an acceptance of the holy scriptures (what we call “the Old Testament”).

But these Athenians? Well, they didn’t accept any of those things. They were

idol worshipers,
polytheists,
religious dilettantes,
spiritual tourists.

It seemed that there was not much common ground between them and Paul.

Yet Paul did not give up. He did not say, “Well, no point in staying here; no point in telling them about Jesus. They won’t get it. I’ll go on to others.”

No, instead he chose to stay and seek common ground.

The common ground he found was in their religiosity. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” He notes and praises this interest in religion, however misguided, however lacking in depth, even as the shockingly idolatrous form of religious devotion that it was. He highlights their interest in religion, their yearning for religious meaning. He identified these, and praised these, seeing them as a good thing. That the Athenians had some stirring for divine truth, for holiness, for a connection with what is most real and lasting, Paul, again, saw as a good thing. And he sees in it common ground.

He then tells them that he had been looking around their city, and he had come upon an altar on which was written this: “To An Unknown God.”

Now, that’s covering your bases!

Well, as I just did, he could have mocked that altar (and quite likely he was not thrilled). But instead, he finds in it further common ground: “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

From that altar’s inscription he found an opening. And from there, this common ground of religious devotion and an altar built to signal an openness to truths their builders may yet be told, Paul makes his way toward telling them about Jesus. He gently undercuts their worship of many gods by appealing to nature and by connecting the dots and by quoting some of their own poets and philosophers.

God made everything that is, including all us human beings.
God is not dependent on nor served by human hands.
In God “we live and move and have our being.”
We are God’s offspring.

Do you see what Paul does here? He seeks the common ground, and then he speaks into the space it opens.

He does this to steer them away from idolatry. He does this to bring them to a point where they can, where they might, hear the good news of Jesus Christ, the word of salvation.

But the common ground Paul finds can’t do everything. There’s a limit to how much that common ground can do, because it is, obviously, what is *common* between them, what they *share*. And at this point, they do not share faith in Jesus Christ. That’s where Paul wants to get to. At a certain point, Paul, having found the common ground and spoken into the space it opens, must then say what they don’t have in common, what they do not yet share.

This is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, his being raised to new life by the One True God.

The resurrection, Paul says, is God's testimony and assurance that Jesus will judge and rule the world.

The resurrection is God's decisive word that reality has changed, and that we must change as well.

The resurrection is God's demand for repentance, and also God's gift of repentance:

repentance from idols and ideologies;
repentance from devotion to false gods willingly dreamed up;
repentance from worship of violence, hate, raw power, and lust;
repentance from spiritual practices that corrupt the imagination and soil the heart.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's demonstration that Jesus is the path

from death to life,
from darkness to light,
from rebellion to salvation,
from wandering to home.

The resurrection is God's seeking common ground with those who need saving, for they are unable to seek such common ground themselves. And the resurrection is God's radically changing beneath their feet the ground on which the saved will walk.



I find what Paul did here surprising, and instructive. You see, Paul was willing to be in conversation, to speak up and say what he believed to those who had a very different religious outlook than he had. Paul confronted the idolatries of the Athenians by first finding common ground with them. He met them where they were, and then sought to go farther.

This is striking to me. Because I think we rarely do what he did. I think we feel that it is so difficult to do what he did, to seek common ground with those who do not share our outlook.

Many in our day find it difficult, and not just when it comes to religion. So many have retreated into their little social ghettos and political tribes and cultural cul-de-sacs, bubbles of insulation reinforced by the news we watch and the web sites we read and the social media platforms we use. When we do interact with those with whom we disagree about our subjects of disagreement, it usually doesn't go well, often devolving into pointless arguments, hurt feelings, aggravation, disgust. Or maybe we just "unfriend" them.

Perhaps it's because we have not first sought common ground. Imagine how different it could be if we would.

Of course, there is so much in our lives today that encourages isolation and discourages seeking common ground.

For most of us, it's not likely better when it comes to talking with others about our faith in Jesus.

How often do we talk about our faith with those who don't share our faith?

How often do we engage in conversation about religion with those who don't accept our religion?

How often do we seek common ground with others, so we might bear witness to Jesus?

How often do we try to learn about the *actual* beliefs (rather than ignorant caricatures of those beliefs) held by Muslims, or Jews, or Hindus, or neo-Pagans, so that we might see points of connection opening the way for us to help them learn about the Jesus in whom we believe?

How able are we to quote for others the poets and seers and sacred texts they hold dear, so we might show that we have some understanding of where they *are* even as we want to help lead them to where they might *be*?

How much effort do we put into understanding the idolatries of our age and the unfulfilled yearnings of the soul that drive those idolatries?

How willing are we to uncover and then admit our own complicity in enabling those idolatries and in propping up those false gods?

I've been reading a book by Kathleen Norris, a deeply and painfully beautiful book full of wisdom and insight. The other day I read this in it: "If there is a religion that encompasses all the world, it is the pursuit of wealth. But Christians must recognize that in slothfully acquiescing to its petty gods, we deny Christ a place on earth even more effectively than do the loud atheists and antitheists of our time."¹

What I am getting at is different than a bland multiculturalism or a lazy pluralism that assumes that all our differences are ultimately unimportant.

We live in a time of great diversity, including religious diversity. Unlike the time when many of you here (but surely not all) were children, it is now pretty certain that many, perhaps most of those whom we know from the neighborhood or work or the grocery store or the "Y" observe a different religion or none at all. No longer can we assume that most people around us participate in some kind of church. Actually, many of them probably think we're fools for doing so. Many in our society have left all forms of organized religion, and many, as the children of those who dropped out of church 30 to 40 years ago, have never had any involvement.

That is the reality. It does no good to complain about it. And it is futile to hope for a return to mandatory school prayer or blue laws or any other form of state mandated support for Christian religious practice. The United States is now, more than at any other time in its history, a religiously pluralistic nation. Today, Christian churches, especially Protestant ones, are no longer dominant in the culture. Usually, the culture never gives us a thought ... until they want our money, or our votes.

It's easy to hide from the differently religious, or the anti-religious, or the spiritual-but-not-religious. Well, maybe not actually hide, but we do find it easy to avoid interacting with them in a substantive way about spiritual matters.

It takes courage to seek the common ground with them, and then speak into the space it opens. It takes courage to enter into conversation not only to understand but also to reveal, to share, to bear witness to the One in whom we believe.

But it also takes humility. It takes humility to admit that what you thought about another's perspective is wrong and in need of expansion. It takes humility to be open and vulnerable about the fact that you don't have all the answers about your faith even as you, rightly, with

¹Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (Rivierhead Books, 2008), p. 128.

good reason, share your faith.

It takes humility. After all, it brings no honor to Jesus nor help to the skeptical by being a jerk!

Now, at the risk of being a jerk myself, I have to say this: don't you tell me, "Hey, Dan, that's your job!"

That, too, would be easy:

to leave to the clergy this seeking of common ground,
to leave up to experts the work of conversation with non-Christians,
to professionalize the activity of Christian witness.

I reject that. I don't believe that.

What do I believe?

I believe that all of us can and must take some of this on.

I believe that all of us can and must be trying to understand better the perspectives around us, as well as trying to understand better our own faith.

I believe that all of us can and must be looking for those public altars built with an openness to truths their builders may yet be told.

I believe that all of us can and must seek common ground with others, and then speak into the space it opens.



My friends, in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God has sought, and found, common ground with us, radically changing beneath our feet the ground on which we walk.

With the boldness, the confidence, and the humility given to those who are being saved, let us seek out common ground with others, so they, too, may hear the blessed name of Jesus.