

**Sermon Preached May 25, 2014
Year A, Easter 6
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

After hearing a great sermon on lifestyle evangelism, one family thought they had better do something to bring people to Jesus. So they invited their neighbors to dinner the following Friday night. When it came to the meal, the hostess was keen to show their neighbors that they upheld Christian standards in their home, so she asked little 5 year old Johnny to say grace. Little Johnny was a bit shy. "I don't know what to say" he said. There was an awkward pause, followed by a reassuring smile from the boy's mother. "Well darling," she said, "just say what Daddy said at breakfast this morning." Obediently, the boy repeated, "Oh God, why do we have those awful people coming to dinner tonight?!"

Evangelism is a four letter word to Episcopalians. It sounds like too personal or emotional a thing for a reserved New Englander to be doing. I think many of us assume evangelism, telling people about church or Jesus, is a sell-job. That it's about pushing others to believe as you do. Fortunately, it's not. Evangelism is about invitation. Evangelism is inviting people to share in your joy of church and relationship with God. They are welcome to accept or reject your invitation. You are not responsible for the outcome. You are only responsible for the invitation. We are all called to be evangelists, people who invite. Whether it is the teller at the bank with whom we strike up a conversation, a colleague from your spin

class, your neighbor across the street, or a friend who is having a rough patch in life and needs some support and guidance.

It's like when we hear about an amazing sale happening at Talbots. We don't keep the great news to our self! We call our friends and tell them. They may not have the time for or interest in the sale, but maybe they do. It's not your responsibility to get them to the store, just to tell them the good news. That's evangelism.

In the reading we heard from the book of Acts this morning, we learn a bit about Paul's missionary journeys. He is traveling around the known world telling people about Jesus and starting small churches in various cities. Paul is the greatest of evangelists. Two of the cities he visited were Thessalonica and Beroea, both located in what is now Greece. In both cities he ended up being persecuted by some the Jewish authorities there and had to flee the city. After he left Beroea, he was escorted by friends to the city of Athens. He planned to stay for a while till his friends Timothy and Silas were able to join him, since they had stayed behind in Beroea for a little while.

At the time of Paul, Athens was a major center of arts, philosophy, and the Sciences. Although it was now a part of the Roman Empire, Athens was still a cultural and cosmopolitan Mecca. Greek culture and language permeated the Roman world. Greek was the language of educated people and Paul, the educated Pharisee, was fluent in Greek. The entire New Testament was written in Greek. This is the land of Homer and Socrates, and the

birthplace of democracy. Along with Rome, Athens was the most educated and cosmopolitan city in the known world, and at the time was already over 1,000 years old.

So Paul is wandering around the ancient city like a tourist, hanging around and waiting for Timothy and Silas to show up. While he is there he notices that the entire city is filled with idols and temples and shrines to many different Gods. It was the practice of Rome, when they conquered a new territory, to simply adopt their Gods. This way they felt confident that all the Gods were appeased. Paul was shocked at this practice. So he started talking to people about the idols, about how bad they were, and also preaching about Jesus. It was common practice in Athens for a philosopher or teacher to just stand up on a soap box and begin talking, so Paul fit right in.

He preached to folks in the synagogue, he went the marketplace and talked to people there. He even discussed philosophies with some local Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Just before our reading today the Bible says, “and some said, ‘What does this babbling wish to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ --because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.’ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” [Acts 17:18b-21] So while Paul’s preaching caused a stir in Thessalonica and Beroea, here in Athens he was treated like just another philosopher.

When I used to live in San Francisco, the Star Trek movie about the whales was being filmed. Apparently, during the filming, some of the cast members took it upon themselves to walk through downtown San Francisco in full Star Trek regalia to see the response. Now, in downtown Topeka, Kansas they might have gotten stares. In downtown San Francisco, a city known for the odd and eccentric, no one gave them a second look. This is how I imagine Athens was towards Paul. Just another philosopher.

However, while they weren't excited about Paul as a messenger, they were somewhat intrigued with his message because it was new. Scripture makes the Athenians sound like an easily distracted child saying, "look! Something shiney!" They were intrigued enough to bring him to a central location, the Areopagus, to tell them more.

He begins by complementing the Athenians for being such religious people. He notes the many shrines in the city and then points out a particular altar to the "unknown God." Paul continues by saying that physical idols of silver or gold are not real. The only real God is the one who created everything, and that perhaps their one altar to the unknown, and un-idoled, God is in fact to the only God who is real. God the Creator. Paul says that this greatest of Gods is close to us. Then he quotes several Greek poets including Epimenides (6th century BCE) when he says, "In him we live and move and have our being" and then Aratus (3rd century BCE) who says, "We are his offspring." Paul goes on to speak of Jesus and the resurrection. The end result of his speech is many people think he's nuts, and leave. But others are curious and want to learn more, and several men and women are converted on the spot.

Paul was an evangelist. There are several things I want you to notice, that we can learn from this encounter.

- 1) Paul is speaking to a non-Jewish crowd, so he doesn't discuss scripture with them. They don't know scripture or Jewish theology. In other words, it's not necessary to be an expert in Bible or theology to talk to others about church. You don't need to wait to be a perfect Christian who knows the Bible, to speak of what God means to you.
- 2) Paul uses Athenians' own cultural and spiritual references. He quotes their own poets to get them to see the wisdom of a belief in God the Creator. He also doesn't judge them as being bad or evil for having idols, he compliments them for being very religious people. How might we use cultural references in our own day to speak about our faith in God and love of church? Maybe when folks speak to us about being "Spiritual, but not religious" we can commend them for their desire for a relationship with the divine and go from there.
- 3) Paul meets them where they are. He doesn't wait for them to come to him. He goes to them: the synagogues, the marketplace, the Areopagus. We shouldn't just hope people just walk into our church. We should invite people wherever we happen to be. We should meet them where they are.
- 4) Most people don't respond to Paul's invitation. But that's not the point. The point of evangelism isn't count up how many "souls you've saved" this week. The point of evangelism is invitation. The outcome of that invitation

is in God's hands, not yours. We simply need to be authentic, and welcome a relationship.

Which reminds me of another joke. What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness and an Episcopalian? Someone who eagerly knocks on the door, but then doesn't know what to say. ... As Episcopalians we need to practice our "elevator speeches!" Have a quick 30 second summary to tell people, of why we go to St. John's and worship God in Christ. If someone asks us, "why do you go to church?" we should know how to respond. It's not a bad practice for us to ponder the answer to that question for our own sake as well.

Please consider being an evangelist, and by this I mean, someone who invites. You don't need to be a preacher in front of lots of people, you simply need to meet the people you already know and see, and if the subject comes up, to invite them to a Sunday service, or to the Auction night, or to the concert series, or the chili cook-off, or to a meditation evening, or to help with Monday Night Suppers, or invite their kids to Church School, or any of the other wonderful things we have going on. No pressure. Simply a thoughtful, gracious invitation. Once you have opened the door, some may choose to walk through.

We have something wonderful here at St. John's. When the subject of church or Sundays or faith or hardship or friendship come up let's, without fear or shame, invite people to share the joy we have come to know in being part of St. John's.

Amen.