

In our reading from Acts of the Apostles, we find the apostle Paul very far from home. He is on his second missionary journey and his preaching in the synagogues in Thessalonica and then Beroea have gotten a certain group of religious so upset that Paul is sent 200 miles away to the coast in Athens for his safety. There he is to wait for his companions. Our text doesn't say anything about Paul being asked to keep a low profile as he waits for his companions Silas and Timothy in this city, but I can imagine those who helped Paul make this journey might have said – please for now stay quiet so you will be safe.

However, a low profile is not in Paul's DNA and in the verses before our passage you will find him preaching and teaching in the synagogues and marketplaces in Athens. Paul is especially disturbed by the number of idols in this Greek city. His preaching attracts attention and the Athenians being lovers of new ideas want to hear more about this new teaching and invite him to speak at the Areopagus – some of your bibles will refer to it as Mars Hill – a place outside the city for debates. This is where we come in with our passage for today. I love how Paul presents his teaching. He says, "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.'" From there he makes the connection between the unknown God and the living God that Paul knows – the one who made the world and all that is in it, the one from whom we are offspring.

When Paul arrived in Athens, he was deeply distressed with the number of idols in the city, but when he speaks at the Areopagus, he speaks from a place of openness and curiosity. Despite his distress with the idols, he kept looking and eventually found the one with the inscription to an unknown God. To me this is quite a feat – to not walk away from practices or ways of being that are upsetting to you, but to stay and observe and to see what you can learn. In doing this, Paul is able to preach to the people and talk about the God he knows and even about Jesus (although he doesn't name him) and the resurrection of the dead. His results are mixed. Some scoff. Others want to hear him again, but some believe.

The stance that Paul demonstrated in our reading today is one that I think is important for all of us especially as we more and more live in a non-religious and world. Not taking this stance can get in the way of being the people of God who go out to love others and share how Jesus has changed our lives. How many of us can share stories of those who have done just that to us? I remember being the Episcopal chaplain at Bowie State University and sitting outside in my collar available for anyone who might want to talk. A young man approached me and said – you need to accept Jesus as your personal Savior. He didn't ask me if I knew Jesus. He didn't even ask my name. I forget what I said – probably that I follow Jesus and he left pretty quickly.

The question I have for all of us is how are we doing that to others? How are we not having that stance of openness and curiosity and friendship? You may be saying – now Rev. Anne-Marie I would never do what that young man did to you – walk up to someone I didn't know and tell them they needed to accept Jesus as their personal Savior. I know, but how else are we not having that stance of openness and curiosity. It is easy to make an assumption and stay in a closed place. I too do it all the time.

- Perhaps we assume our neighbors who never go to church want nothing to do with God and after getting to know them find out they have a deep prayer life.
- Perhaps we have relatives who we assumed didn't believe in God and then come to find out that they do and have been longing to have a conversation about God and need help finding a faith community.
- Maybe we assume that the people who drive us crazy playing loud music in our neighborhood don't care about anyone and anybody. After taking the time to know them, we may find out about their extremely stressful job and that the music helps them decompress.

This all comes back to Jesus' commandment to love in our Gospel reading. It is not an option or a suggestion. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." His commandments? – to love God and to love one another as God loves us. The key to that love is being open to the other and truly hearing their story. That same openness God has for us, we are asked to have for others. That openness doesn't happen just like that. It is a process and a practice - actions that Paul did beautifully in a foreign city full of distressing idols.

What are the distressing idols, habits or circumstances that are getting in the way of you having that stance of openness to another? Take a moment to think about what gets in the way of relationship with another or even leads to condemnation of another.

A circumstance where we can easily close ourselves off and lose that stance of openness is the one where our way of social distancing and being safe is right and the other person's is wrong. And while we may very well be correct, with this comes the temptation to condemn the other. I struggle with it all the time – as I go for walks or in the store or just about anything else. This is going to get harder as things begin to open up as we figure out how to come out of quarantine safely. Now I am not saying to run up to the unmasked person and give them a hug. I am asking you to consider that masked or unmasked, the person is one of God's children who Jesus commands us to love. Perhaps by being open to them (a safe distance away) we can hear about what's happening in their lives. Maybe we can share why we wear a mask and even how God lifts us up each and every day – something they may be desperately needing to hear. Paul didn't let the idols get in his way of sharing the message of God's love. Let us be aware of our own idols

that get in the way of us going out to do as Jesus commanded – to love one another as he loves us. Amen