

Acts 17:16-34

Christian Curiosity

Sunday July 26, 2015

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This summer, as a part of my preparation for ordained ministry, I am completing CPE - Clinical Pastoral Education at Boston Medical Center. What this means is that I am spending 10 weeks of my summer learning about ministry in a hospital setting serving as a Chaplain. There are countless ways in which this program is impacting my growth and understanding of not only ministry, but of humanity, of inequality, of despair. But today I want to share with you a part of my commute that has taught me an invaluable lesson. Everyday myself and a colleague in the same program at BMC, walk home after our long days up the hill. For those of you who have been to Andover Newton, you know how the hill is deceptively treacherous. No amount of working out makes you fit for that hill.

At the beginning of the summer, we were walking up Herrick road, in our post-chaplaincy exhaustion, to find that a house on our street was gone. Entirely demolished in a day. Its remnants already ushered away. The house was there one day, gone the next, without warning. On our way home each day throughout the summer we made it a game of curiosity coming back up the steep hill. What will have happened on the lot today? What will have changed? There is even this toy bulldozer on the lot that we wonder if it will move. Every day we generate different wonderings and curiosity after a long day of ministry.

And every day for 8 weeks, we have been disappointed because nothing appears to be happening with the lot. But we maintain our curiosity, play, and wonder each day on the way home. We wonder if today is the day something will happen!

I share this story because of the importance of curiosity, of wonderment, within our Christian Community. In the Scripture reading today we see Paul engaging with the Athenian community. We could spend time looking at what Paul shares with his speech in the Areopagus. We could reflect on his mostly failed attempt to engage in interfaith dialogue by assigning and assuming his own meaning on to a people who already have their own meaning and understanding of the world. But that is an entire sermon for another day.

Today, I invite us to look at the Athenians. In a recent *StillSpeaking* Daily Devotional e-mail, Rev. Quinn Caldwell writes, “Pagans don't usually come off so well in our Bible. But I gotta say, I like these Athenians. I mean, Paul has basically made a career of being a jerk and annoying everybody in sight. If he's not holding people's cloaks while they stone somebody, he's writing scathing letters or making the authorities so mad they throw him in jail and/or execute him. Prickly, you know?”

Caldwell continues, “I can't imagine he dialed it back any as he stood there preaching in the middle of all those temples to pagan gods. And yet, here are the people of Athens, not rioting but instead courteously asking him to a sophisticated Mars Hill salon to share his ideas.”

After being inspired by Rev. Caldwell take on this passage, I believe the response of the Athenians is one of the main messages of this chapter. Luke is not only highlighting what Paul did, but how the community responds. Luke is referred to as a “theological historian” in his writings of Luke-Acts. This means that while Acts is a history of the early Church, it is also a product of Luke’s theological understanding of the unfolding events. Acts is not just a historical fact sheet. It is brimming with meaning to understand and discover through intentional reflection.

The Athenians welcomed Paul. They were curious about this message of a risen savior. What was it about this Jesus guy that made Paul so impassioned? The Athenians loved what was ever new, and upcoming in philosophy, law, religion, and politics. It was their pastime to listen and debate with one another. In fact, the Areopagus was often where the learned would come to debate the disagreements of the day. It was the council of elders. While the Areopagus was also a place of criminal court, it was a place of discussion and thought.

Paul was basically the tabloid cover of the week for the Athenians, coming in with his strange, new religious convictions. The Athenians were likely beyond excited to have something new to discuss.

I simply love what the Athenians say to Paul. I am not a big fan of “The Message” translation of the Bible as it takes substantial liberties with interpretation. However, I delight in its take on the Athenians. The Athenians say, “This is a new one on us. We’ve never heard anything quite like it. Where did you come up with this anyway? Explain it so we can understand.” The Athenians are saying: This guy is weird. We have no idea what is he talking about. Let’s give him time to share his thoughts in our most prestigious place of community debate.

How delightfully odd. Instead of reacting with aggression the Athenians admit that they do not understand Paul. Instead of brushing him off, they listen. Instead of making assumptions, they

take the time to learn from this stranger in their midst. The Athenians express to Paul, "What are you trying to say? Help us understand. There is more we do not know."

In "The Voice" translation of the Bible, which I recommend for personal study, it says that what Paul was preaching about "stirred their curiosity;" Stirred their curiosity.

When is the last time your curiosity was stirred? When have you been mixed up, confused, excited, overwhelmed, and maybe unsure where things will settle when the stirring subsides?

This value of being a curious Christian is evident in our denomination. In 2004, the United Church of Christ began reflecting on how we could sum up and proclaim who we are as a denomination. What makes us - us in the UCC? A fellow colleague and classmate at Andover Newton, Ron Buford, was a leader in what we now know as the "God is Still Speaking" campaign, which is embraced across the country. God is still speaking.

While this slogan of a Still Speaking God is new, its roots can be traced all the way back to the Mayflower. John Robinson was the Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers, before they left for new opportunities in the United States. He was a Separatist and one of the founders of the Congregational Church. Robinson did not make the original journey over to the states on the Mayflower as he stayed behind to help support his church. Through the trials and tribulations of persecution for speaking and acting out against the established Church, Robinson was a committed and prolific writer.

When a group of his community was setting sail he said, "If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth from my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy Word." The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word. God is still speaking. There is more to the story that we do not know. Just like the Athenians had curiosity to seek meaning in Paul's words, Robinson was able to instill a sense of curiosity that weaved through history - all the way to today UCC.

Curiosity. It is in our make up as Christians. In the UCC we summarize this belief as a Still Speaking God. We are called to wonder, to be astonished, and to be curious. In my time as a chaplain, I have been amazed at how much a patient will open up when I ask a question like, "I wonder how this feels" or "I'm curious about your thoughts." There is something that hits the core of our being when curiosity is at the forefront. When is the last time that you have touched that core of someone else? When is the last time that someone was curious about you?

Where I believe we all stumble in this calling to be curious is linked to the idea of humility. Being humble is a significant part of being curious. The Athenians admitted that they did not grasp what Paul was saying. They did not pretend or assume they understood Paul. They did not act as if they did not have more to learn. John Robinson assured his people that there were more ways God would show Godself – and that his congregation needed to be attentive to the ways God is still speaking.

When are we slow to admit that we do not understand someone? What can we learn from those who came before us? Our Scripture and our history calls us to be curious. Curiosity opens doors to learn and discover what is yet unknown. We are called to be curious about each other, about the stranger, and about the enemy. In a world where we feel more divided than united, I wonder how a dash of curiosity and a pinch of humility could change the world?

In an age where all “answers” feel a Google search away, how do we maintain the humble posture of curiosity like the Athenians? How do we live in to this curious place to hear what God is still speaking? This is what church is. A place to quiet ourselves together so that God is the loudest voice. The church is a place where we grow curiosity in community.

It is a place where we admit that we do not know everything, and deeply listen to our neighbor’s experience so that we can expand our own horizons. We maintain our curiosity when we maintain community.

I hope you all have been abuzz with curiosity about the mystery of the lot on Herrick Road. Sure, you were listening to my sermon and reflecting, but I hope a part of you was wondering – is that it? Is she leaving us with this underwhelming story where nothing changes? Does anything happen? Maybe this spark of curiosity can start something beautiful, or at least, a conversation in community. What will you be curious about this week? Amen.