

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
May 21, 2017

**“The Overlooked Wink”**

“... And the times of this ignorance God winked at;  
but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.” KJV

“While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,  
now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

NVSV

**PRELUDE**

Part of our worship this morning  
has included time for teacher recognition,  
uplifting and expressing appreciation  
for those who teach -  
who work with children and youth and adults -  
that we might grow in our knowledge,  
our awareness, our understanding  
of Christian faith.

Christian education is a lifelong endeavor;  
we may advance, but we never really master  
all a Christian curriculum has to offer.  
The depths are inexhaustible.  
There is always more  
to be gleaned in our quest  
to apprehend the love of God  
so poignantly revealed in Jesus  
and the various church traditions that adhere  
by faith and works  
to his word and wisdom.

What is the Elizabeth Prentiss prayer put to song?

**More love to you, O Christ, more love to you!  
In all I say and do, more love, O Christ, to you,  
more love to you, more love to you!** (NCH, No. 456).

How grateful we are for those people who have helped plan, lead, and guide us through this past year, enriching our lives that we might practice faith, and do so while honoring all the questions that arise when a curious people seek to learn more, and love more the God who so loved, and still loves us.

It was roughly a thousand years ago that Abelard, a great teacher in the medieval age, said,

**“The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning...For by doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we arrive at the truth”**  
((Sic et Non, circa 1120).

Our quest, our questioning, is the beginning of meaningful exploration of faith for life defining encounter with the God to whom we belong.

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Our scripture lesson this morning, a portion of the 17th chapter from the Book of Acts, vs. 22-31, is a report of an episode that occurred when the apostle Paul visited the Greek city of Athens.

Athens was not part of a planned vacation for Paul, it was a city of refuge for Paul, a sanctuary providing safety such that he be not harmed or rudely swatted away as an irritant, as an unwelcome alien.

There are two contextual issues to mention. First, we need identify the Paul who is

the primary character in our reading. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their study of Paul and his role in the advancing of the Christian movement, identify three different “Paul’s” in the New Testament literature associated with the apostle.

They speak of the

- (a) radical Paul;
- (b) conservative Paul;
- (c) reactionary Paul.

You can tell the difference between these three by how they address social issues, particularly the status to slaves and women, in the faith community, and the teachings that apply to family order.

The radical Paul subverts culture; the conservative Paul tend to accommodate culture; the reactionary Paul defends and mimics patriarchal culture.

Without knowledge and awareness of these critical distinctions, we are left with confusing, indeed conflicted teachings in our scripture. So - it is helpful to know which Paul we are dealing with, the context that is presented, depending upon where we are reading.

There is yet a fourth Paul to consider, the Paul we encounter by way of the author of Acts, from which our lesson comes this morning.

It is the author of Acts that gives us a detailed portrait of Paul being engaged in missionary work as an itinerant preacher/teacher of Christian gospel. He is on his second journey, teamed with two associates: Silas and Timothy; these three have taken a continental leap on

this journey, moving from Asia to Europe; venturing into the land of the Greeks and the Macedonians (see Acts 16:9).

The Paul portrayed in Acts is always eager to proclaim gospel; and in doing so, he stirred hearts and minds, and often encounter communal resistance.

In Philippi he was beaten with rods - flogged, then thrown into jail after having liberated a slave-girl from profiteering pimps.

Then he was off to Thessalonica - preaching and teaching, persuading some, rankling others, such that a mob formed and set the city in an uproar (Acts 17:5); things got so tense, it was determined best to get Paul and Silas out of town, so they headed off to a neighboring town by the name of Beroea.

They received a good welcome there and had preaching success - many Jews believed, we read, **“including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.”**

But the mob from Thessalonica followed, so that Paul was given church escort to Athens, to ensure his safety.

So - Paul in Athens - waiting for Silas and Timothy to catch up.

Athens - a university city  
of global fame;  
a storied, learned city, with a rich history,  
a gem in the Axial age (800-200 BCE),  
the city of Solon, the slayer of Socrates,  
where Plato established his academy.

Athens, a proud, exceptional city,  
“the Hellas of Hellas,”  
the “best of” among all the rest,

where mortals dared rid themselves of tyrants  
whether human or divine, to rule themselves.

According to the author of Acts,  
the Athenians of the first century  
were curious people. We read:

**“... the Athenians and the foreigners  
living there would spend their time  
in nothing but telling or hearing something  
new.”** They were thrilled with novelty,  
any new thing that might expand their  
understanding of life and the world.

Paul earned an invitation to share his  
**“new teaching”** with the Athenian literati.  
And his sermon outline is pretty much  
what we had as our lesson this morning.

Paul professes knowledge of a God  
unknown to the Greeks, but acknowledged  
by them nonetheless via an altar,  
devoted to the Unknown.

Paul references the God who made the world  
and everything in it (v. 24),  
a Maker, “the Lord” of heaven and earth;  
there is a kinship that exists on earth –  
not of tribe, clan, race or nation/state,  
but a kinship of humanity;  
all who inhabit the earth have their Source  
in God, and all creatures who dwell on earth  
are invested with desire to seek and find,  
**“to grope”** for God is the term of translation  
in the NRSV, who is in fact quite near  
(Psalm 34:18; Psalm 145:18; Deuteronomy 30:14).  
In this God we **“live and move and have our being,”**  
we are offspring, children each and every one of us,  
such that we are the image of God, and God not  
the images that we create in art and our human imagination.

The one verse that has most intrigued me is the reference to the disabling effects of human ignorance. As translated in the King James Version:

**And the times of this ignorance  
God winked at; but now commandeth  
all (wo)men everywhere to repent” (KJV).**

God has winked, overlooked, indulged our capacity to act in ignorance; to be unaware, oblivious to the ties that bind. Yet now, according to Paul, we are in a new age,  
    an age of accountability,  
    an age of being responsible  
    for what revelations we are permitted.

Point One –  
easy to pick on church; church can be so elegant, elevating, yet so judgmental, crude, cruel in its pronouncements. Would not every church benefit from a side altar, where the penitent might pray to the unknown God, seek amendment for what we did, when not fully understanding the consequences; seek the wink and nod, the mercy, of having acted without thought or prayer reflection.

But the church also has teachings that do impact our thoughts and actions. A recent Atlantic article notes the danger posed by religious people who do not practice ... religious people who vote, but who are unaffiliated, are statically more likely to fear the outsider, to be intolerant of the stranger. They are more likely to want a wall of protection on the borders that define identities, rather than bridge of understanding.

“The message of (God’s) universal love” serves to erode human fear and prejudice.

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The church is always in need of  
teachers who inspire excellence.

**“Without education,  
we are in a horrible and deadly danger  
of taking educated people seriously”**  
(G.K. Chesterton).

Our plight today is quite challenging.  
We have leaders galore who do not  
know the grave consequences of their  
limitations.

**“The great enemy of knowledge is not ignorance,  
it is the illusion of knowledge”**  
(Daniel Boorstin)

There is a psalm we all ought to know,  
and knowing it, we need pray it,  
and praying it, we need practice it.

**“... teach us to number our days  
that we may gain a wise heart”**  
(Psalm 90:12).

Let us know our limitations, that  
we may live earnestly, that we may  
seize the day, and not let it pass  
without effort and awareness of  
honoring the God who winks,  
who wills that we grow wise and  
discerning.

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A final thought.

I'm not sure the Athenians were receptive when Paul alluded to their ignorance being overlooked by the God who now asks for their attention (repentance).  
He had not great success in Athens.  
He was largely ignored.

I hope that we, though, can see what he was driving at. That God comes, and calls, and invites our communion. God comes, and calls, and invites us to be part of a new creation, that we, bound together, model a new civitas, a commonwealth, a city of God.

Good teachers help point the way.  
Good teachers help us filter the  
    voices worth heeding.  
Good teachers instill within us  
    a desire to aspire, to become  
        what we were designed to be.

**“Words are things. You must be careful, careful about calling people out of their names, using racial pejoratives and sexual pejoratives and all that ignorance. Don't do that. Some day we'll be able to rescue the power of words. I think they are things. They get on the walls. They get in your wall paper. They get in your rugs, in your upholstery, and your clothes, and finally in you”**  
(Maya Angelou)

Faith Fact:  
You are forgiven.

Faith Fact:  
You are loved.

Faith Fact:  
You are precious in God's sight.

Faith Fact:  
You are a child of God.

Faith Fact:  
You carry, you embody, in your head  
and heart, in what you make of your  
hands, the love and mercy of God,

Faith Fact:  
You are love of Jesus  
God has chosen to serve in the world,  
whose love we are share with the world  
to save the world.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*