

And They'll Know We Are Christians

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, May 10, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Acts 17:22-31](#) and [John 14:15-21](#)

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Paul was on the run. Well, maybe not on the run, but he was at least on the walk. Paul was basically “hiding out” in Athens. In the prior chapters of the Book of Acts, he has attempted to share the Gospel in Thessalonica and Berea and – well, things did not go well. Basically, Paul was on the lam. He was hiding out.

And he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

We come into the story in the midst of one of his evangelical journeys, traveling around the Mediterranean world, starting new churches and encouraging the converts to this new way, this new movement of Jesus-followers. Silas and Timothy have stayed behind at their last stop and Paul has gone on ahead to Athens. Paul *had* some time waiting for the others to catch up, and, in his wanderings around Athens, he got upset.

He noticed that the city was full of idols, and as a good Jew, this was upsetting. Upsetting enough that Paul had to say something. So every day, he would go somewhere where there were people – the synagogue, the marketplace – and he would talk about God and Jesus and the resurrection. He got into arguments with Epicureans, who believed that the gods did not intervene in daily life.¹ He got into arguments with Stoics, who suppressed passions and focused on behavior over beliefs.²

Based on who he argued with, it appears that Paul thought that what you believed mattered, that you should believe in one God (Yahweh) who is active in daily life, and he believed that there are reasons to be passionate. Some of the people who he got into discussions with took Paul out to the Areopagus, known as Mars Hill by the Romans, for further discussion.

In classical times, the Areopagus was the seat of the Athenian court of appeals, a place of justice and judgment.³ By this time, the author of Acts seems to say that it had become a place of much more common conversation: “the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new,” is how the *New Revised Standard Version* translates the description.⁴ The more vernacular paraphrase, *The Message*, translates the description, “There were always people hanging around, natives and tourists alike, waiting for the latest tidbit on most anything.”⁵

Paul used this as another opportunity to share his story. “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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”⁶

In his travels around Athens, Paul not only found the upsetting altars and idols, he also found an altar to “an unknown god.” I guess the Athenians were covering all the bases. Paul found the opening he needed to share his story. He used this “unknown god” as a

vehicle to tell his story about Yahweh and Jesus (though, interestingly, Paul doesn't specifically name Jesus).

Paul tells them that the uncontainable God is the creator of the universe and gives us life. "From one ancestor," Paul says, "[Yahweh] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and ... allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for ... and find [God] – though indeed [God] is not far from each one of us."⁷

Paul makes an interesting assumption here – one that I agree with: Human beings long for a connection with the intimately transcendent, with holy-ness, with the ultimate within which we live and move and have our being. Human beings long for God. And since God made us, we can't make God. This God we long for can't be limited to altars and shrines and idols.

Paul's "doxology about the wonder of creation turns into a summons to repent. Only late in the paragraph of Paul's speech in Acts is Jesus mentioned, and this only by allusion to 'a man whom [God] has appointed' (Acts 17: 31). The speech culminates with reference to Jesus about whom Paul makes this affirmation: First, Jesus is raised from the dead. Second, his resurrection is a promise that all will be judged in righteousness."⁸ The One who made us calls us to turn away from our ignorance and from our unrighteousness.

I love how Paul can't keep his mouth shut. He has a story to tell. He wants to tell it. And he is wise enough to find his opening. I imagine Paul wandering the streets of Athens, noticing the altar to an unknown God, and thinking, "I can use that. I was looking for an opening and there it is. That's my door to sharing my story."

As I studied this scripture more carefully, I noticed that Paul had more than his story and this opening. Looking carefully at the story, I see he had five things. First, he had his story to share. Paul had been an upholder of the purity of Judaism.

You might remember that in last week's reading from Acts, the people who stoned Stephen to death put their coats in the care of a guy named Saul. That Saul became a major persecutor of Christians. And then he had an experience, an encounter with the resurrected Christ, and his life was transformed. His life was so transformed he changed his name – to Paul. He had a whole new purpose – letting people know about what God was doing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That's what he knew in his life and it's what he had to share.

Second, he had a reason for sharing it. He probably had reasons (plural) for sharing it. Here in Athens, we read that his reason was how upset he was by seeing all the altars to false gods and idols. The people of the city didn't even know who the real God was, let alone anything about Jesus.

Third, he had people to share it with. People gathered in the synagogue and in the marketplace. They liked to talk, to gossip. They liked to argue philosophy.

Fourth, he had an opening – the altar to an unknown god. And fifth, he had the persistence to keep sharing it until someone started to listen. He went to the synagogue. He went to the marketplace. He went to that Areopagus. And eventually, some people listened and were convinced and joined this movement of Jesus-followers.

Now, I don't want you to lose track of all five of these things. I think that each you has all five of them as well. But having a reason for sharing your story, having people to share it with, having an opening to share it, and having the persistence to keep sharing it really don't matter if you don't know what your story is.

What is your story?

My story is not early as dramatic as Paul's (though it's worth noting that in this situation, here on Mars Hill, Paul doesn't share the dramatic parts of his story). I don't have a blasted off my donkey and blinded conversion experience. My story is one of always being connected with God, though my understanding of what I mean when I say "God" is continually evolving.

Maybe I haven't been knocked off my ass by God, but I've been wowed by God. I've had experiences of the intimately transcendent that have taken me out of myself and into a greater wholeness.

And I've discovered that my life has meaning and grounding and direction because of my relationship with God – the God revealed in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I have come to realize that if I didn't have that relationship I might still have found meaning and grounding and direction – it just would have been in one of the idols of our culture, an idol like accumulation, or greed, or even violence. Instead, I've found meaning, grounding, and direction in Yahweh.

But that's not much of a story, is it? On Mars Hill, this philosophical description might be effective. In most of the rest of life, it's the stories of the incidents moving me from one point to another on this journey that would be compelling. For someone, my story of coming to terms with my sexuality and coming to accept God's full embrace of me, sexuality and all, might be the story they need to hear. For yet another person, my story of how I came to be convinced that climate change is the moral issue of our day may be the story I need to share, and for someone else, that story might turn them off. Someone else might need to hear my story of struggling to love people who seem to me to be deeply hateful. And for someone else, my story of God's love and power experienced in my journey with grief after my mother died might connect in a way nothing else I might say could. Regardless, I need to bring my stories. Once we know our stories, we need to check in on our motivation.

What is our reason for sharing our stories? So often, Christian evangelism is experienced as a one-two punch: You're a sinner (punch one), but believing in Jesus, accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior will save you (punch two). Historically this is not how Christianity was spread. While Paul did a great job at getting a core group of people together to start a church, the primary way the early church proclaimed the good news, the evangel, was through caring for the poor and for those most in need.

The good news wasn't shared to save people from a wrathful God. The good news was shared to make lives better for people here and now. My suspicion is that a similar focus today is likely to draw more people into God's love than the one-two punch method. I believe that people are more likely to be drawn by love than by fear – or at least they will be drawn more meaningfully by love than by fear.

If John quotes Jesus accurately, the big thing Jesus wants us to do – out of a sense of love for him, not out of a sense of obligation – is to keep his commandments. And what are his commandments? Love. Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. Love. As the old camp song teaches, people will know we are Christians by our love.

So, we have our stories and we have our motivation (embodying God's love). Looking at Paul's method of evangelism, of sharing the good news, the next two things we need are people to share it with and an opening for the sharing.

For 16 years, Roger Wolsey⁹ had a dog named "Kingdom." He took the dog to the dog park and would yell out, "Kingdom, come!" and people would laugh. That laughter created an opening to talk. Being a Progressive Christian, Roger would just talk; no punching. Sometimes the conversations went deep.

For years he had both the Jesus fish emblem on the back of his car, and next to it the Darwin fish emblem. He put them on his car in a way that made it look like they were kissing. This led to conversations in parking lots about how it is possible for a Christian to embrace science and for a scientist to embrace Christianity.

Wearing a t-shirt or putting a sticker on your laptop or water bottle might invite conversation. According to Wolsey (and I'm quoting him because I agree with him), "What it comes down most to is, are we walking our talk?" He says we can do this by listening without an agenda, to listen empathetically (and not defensively) as someone shares what it is they need to share, even if they end up dissing Christianity and their experiences of Church. He calls on Progressive Christians to be "a loving presence."

Know your stories. Embody the love you know through Jesus as a reason to share those stories. Figure out who you can share your stories with. Look for an opening, an invitation to dialog, that starts with love-filled listening. And share your stories. And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.

Questions for reflection:

What is your story?

Why do you want to share it?

With whom could you share it?

What openings might enable you to share it?

Do you have the persistence to keep sharing it?

¹ "Epicureanism," *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epicureanism> (24 May 2014).

² "Stoicism," *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism> (24 May 2014).

³ "Areopagus," *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Areopagus> (24 May 2014).

⁴ Acts 17:21, NRSV.

⁵ Acts 17:21, *The Message*.

⁶ Acts 17:22b-23, NRSV.

⁷ Acts 17:26-27, NRSV.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "A Daring Love," *Sojourners*, <http://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/daring-love> (24 May 2014).

⁹ Roger Wolsey, "Q: What Is A Progressive Christian Approach to Evangelism?" *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/xwTmMs6CLO4> (posted 2024, accessed 8 May 2026).