

Title: Intentionally Connecting for the sake of the Gospel

Introduction:

Has everyone seen the Disney movie Aladdin? It's pretty popular. Aladdin lives on the street with his pet monkey Abu in the town of Agrabah. One day, Aladdin sees a beautiful woman. He saves her and spends some time with her and falls in love. Then it's revealed that this woman is the Princess. Princess Jasmine. If you know the story, he ends up finding a magic lamp with a genie and gets 3 wishes. His heart's desire is to marry the princess. So, his first wish is that the genie would make him a prince. Is Aladdin a real prince? No. But he wants to become one so he may win over the girl.

Paul shares this similar philosophy with Aladdin for how to win people over. Paul's heart's desire was to win people over with the gospel. In Corinthians he writes that he is willing to become all things to all people. To the weak he became weak, to the Jews he became like a Jew, to those under the law he became like one under the law = all for the sake of the gospel. Was he weak or under the law? No. Was he a Jew? In ethnicity only. To intentionally connect with people, he became like them. To win them over with the gospel.

In our text this morning, Paul goes to Athens. Athens. The intellectual centre of the world. To the intellectuals, he became like an intellectual. Was he an intellectual? He was very well educated, so he was. We can assume it was easier to intentionally connect with this group of people.

Point 1:

Let's look at Paul's tactics for winning over the people in this city with the gospel. How does Paul intentionally connect with the people in the city of Athens?

The first thing Paul does is observe the city. Paul takes the time to walk around the city and take it all in. He's not doing it as a tourist. Our text says that he is not enjoying himself, but his heart is feeling distressed because he can see the city is full of idols. He walks around to learn and to understand. He is not learning just to learn. He is learning and observing with a purpose – so he might have the opportunity to share the good news.

After getting a good feel for what Athens was about, he starts small. He goes to the Synagogue and in the marketplace and begins reasoning and debating with people who were there. He keeps coming back day after day until he begins getting some recognition. He ends up capturing the attention of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The big guns in the city began to argue with him and even insulting Paul by calling him a babblers. An empty talker. That didn't last long because in verse 19 it says that they brought him to the Areopagus. They recognized that Paul was smart and therefore they wanted to give him a platform.

They give this intellectual an opportunity. In our text we read Paul's message. Usually, these addresses in the Aeropagus last hours, so we likely just get a snippet here. And from what we can see - it is brilliant. Brilliant because he adapted to that culture to know how to appeal to them. He became one of them. He does not compromise the gospel but adapts in order to bring it more effectively to his audience. I'd like to take you through some of what Paul would have learned about Athens and why he preached the way he did.

a) When he walked around Athens, we read that his heart was full of distress when he saw all the idols. We read that he saw an altar that said,

“to an unknown god.” Paul brings this up and almost affirms them. He says, “you are very religious.” He says this to connect with them. It is something they both have in common. He finds the common ground and then he challenges them. He essentially says, “you have to admit now that you actually don’t know what you are worshipping.” Connection then a challenge to get them thinking about what they believe.

Paul continues to speak, so we can imagine that they are still engaged. Maybe they are thinking, “hmmm...yea, that makes sense actually. That is what I believe.

b) In the middle part of his message he uses scripture. Isaiah and Genesis. He doesn’t quote and say, “well, in Isaiah chapter...” he just says it like ordinary speech. He is strategic. He finds common themes with the Stoics and Epicureans to connect with them. Such as “God is near, God created, and God doesn’t need us.” Everyone listening would have agreed with at least one of those things. Then he challenged them by saying things like, “God created everyone, God has a plan and order, God can be known and is personal.” This would have been new to everyone listening.

What’s this? If God created everyone... that means if someone isn’t Greek... they aren’t a barbarian? Huh. And we can actually get to know this God and have a relationship with him? Whoa.

Connection then challenge.

c) Then Paul does something pretty daring. I think. In verse 28 he quotes what Athenians believe about Zeus. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” That was first said about Zeus. “We are his offspring” That was first said about Zeus. Both those phrases are what Athenians believe about their god. Paul boldly takes what was said about Zeus and declares that those things are actually true about the Christian God.

The connection IS the challenge.

Some mouths may have dropped at this point, but we can imagine the people are really engaged. Paul has built rapport with the audience. Connected with them. Challenged them. He talked with many of them in the town beforehand. Everything that he is doing is for what he is about to say next. He has developed a framework and a structure for sharing the gospel.

That is where Paul goes. He preaches about the resurrection and how this is proof that Jesus is the judge of the world. He doesn't start with that. He doesn't start by saying, "Hey everyone! Jesus died on the cross, then rose again from the dead, and if we repent, believe in Christ, we will be made right with God and have eternal life." He builds the framework first. Then he moves to profess the gospel so the people can make more sense of it.

He only gets to the resurrection and judgement aspect before things fall apart. When people heard that it was too much. We read that some people mocked him. This stuff was too new. The resurrection of the body was too over the top. Maybe when they mocked him, they said, "Silly guy. Death can't be reversed!"

There was a limit to how far Paul could go in his connection. Not everyone who heard the gospel received it – and he was even made fun of for it, and he left his platform.

Point 2:

We are all human beings, and we are all limited in our capacity to win people over for the gospel. Even though we are limited, we are still commanded to make disciples, to be a light to the world, and win people over with the gospel. Perhaps it's because we know we are limited that this intimidates us. We know we can get mocked that scares us from

trying. We are not Paul. We have different gifts and live in a different era. But we can still learn from his strategy. And I would like to suggest that taking a look at our text actually will help us and ease our nerves when it comes to talking with others about Christ.

Maybe when we hear the words, “share the gospel” it can be daunting. So, I suggest we start as Paul started and begin the same, “Connect with your neighbor.” How? What does Paul do first? He doesn’t preach at them. He doesn’t push his agenda. He does not force the gospel on people. He observes. He observes and he learns. He learns what it is they believe and where the similarities are and where the differences are.

This is doable for us, but it also means being uncomfortable. We step into their shoes. Become like them. Maybe there are some people we connect with more easily than others, but some we may have to give up some of our freedoms for. So, it’s important that we remember that it is all for the sake of the gospel. Our hearts desire is to win over people for the sake of the gospel.

Connecting is doable, but potentially uncomfortable. It is also a very respectful and welcoming posture. When we hear people’s stories, we can understand them. It is a very loving posture to listen genuinely. Perhaps the opportunity won’t be there to engage. We love and learn without strings attached.

When listening and learning to what people believe, you may find some things that you have in common.

For example. Maybe you’re talking to a Jew or a Muslim. You can affirm: “I see you believe in one God.” Maybe you are talking to a Jehovah’s Witness or Mormon. You can affirm, “I see you value the Bible.” Maybe talking to an atheist who is pursuing something they are passionate about. You can affirm, “I see you care about the vulnerable. I

see you love love. I see you want to care for the environment. I see you care about the poor.”

When we want to intentionally connect with our neighbor, we can find the things that we have in common. It’s good to build rapport. We can affirm the things that they have right.

If the opportunity allows, we can engage our neighbors. Stating what we both believe and perhaps asking questions. “I see you believe in one God. Tell me more how your God makes things right? I see you value the Bible, what do you think of the verse in Galatians about how there is only gospel?” I see you care about the vulnerable. Tell me more about how you understand justice. I see you love love. How do you define love?” With questions we can learn more and engage at a deeper level. They may also have to think through things that they believe. They may ask you questions, and you’ll have to learn more too.

Maybe there are opportunities to take what they believe and say that is it true about our God. One example is Aboriginal Spirituality. They participate in something called 4 directions prayer. I’ve been to a few prayer gathering where Pastor Harold Roscher has led us in prayer using the 4 directions prayer. He took something in his culture, without compromising the gospel, uses it as a prayer to the Christian God. Similarly, in Aboriginal Spirituality, God is called Creator. Christians believe that our God is the creator. Pastor Harold will refer to the Christian God as Creator as a way to intentionally connect and ultimately to win people over with the gospel.

I’m not sure how these conversations would go with the people in your life as you intentionally connect with them. I’m not sure how long it might take to build a framework. Maybe there is just learning and observing, and you love your neighbor by listening. Maybe you get to engage and challenge each other and maybe building that framework goes on for days or maybe even years.

And then maybe, just maybe, you will be invited to profess what you believe. You will be given the opportunity to share the gospel. My guess is this is where we get a little intimidated.

It can be fun to engage and challenge people in a friendly atmosphere. It's scarier when we are given the platform. Because we imagine the limit. Perhaps we can only go so far. It happened with Paul. He mentioned the resurrection and bam! That was where the listeners lost interest. That's where they mocked him. For others it could be something else:

- Repent? Why would I need to do that? I'm not a bad person.
- God is personal? Nah. The universe and the angels take care of me.

Hitting a limit means pain. No one likes being made fun of. No one enjoys being called names. We are humans and therefore we are limited in our capacity. I want to impress upon us this morning though: Let God decide the limit, not us.

Page 3: We can't. God can.

For example. There once was a university volleyball coach. He had a lot of guys trying out for the team. His plan was to have tryouts throughout the week and make cuts as the days passed. Right away he noticed a player. He was not the most skilled on the team, but he worked really hard, had a good attitude, and showed solid leadership. As the days passed, the coach began cutting some of the players.

In the middle of the week as they had another tryout, he noticed that the one player didn't show up. In the end, of course that player didn't make the team. Later, the coach ran into him and asked him what happened. He said something like, "aw well, I knew I wasn't going to make it, so I just stopped. I didn't want to get cut." The coach was a little stunned and said, "I don't know for sure if you would have made the team, but you might have. You should have let me make that decision."

The player decided his own limit. He stopped before the coach could cut him because he thought it would be too painful. As a result, he for sure didn't make the team. He didn't realize the coach had looked on him with favor. If he had let the coach set his limit, he would have gone farther. Perhaps even made it.

In a similar way, do we put a limit ourselves? We think, well, if I said that, they would reject it and reject me. What if I make a mistake? What if... and we don't want to feel the pain of getting cut, so we do it ourselves. We don't do it. Avoid it. I do this too. When I say this, I say also this to myself:

Let's let God decide our limit. Beginning by learning is an easy non-invasive step. Beginning to ask questions and engage can be a fun way to get to know someone and build a framework of what Christians believe. Then maybe the opportunity will come to profess what we believe. And when that happens – let's take it. Maybe there will be a limit there, but let God decide our limit. Not us.

It's true that Paul hit a limit with the crowd. Many people there sneered at him and walked away. They could not grasp the resurrection. They thought Paul was ridiculous. But it is also true that some of the people there went up to Paul and said they wanted to hear more. We are told a member of the Areopagus believed, a woman... and a number of others.

On top of that, how many seeds were planted? How many people went home and thought about what Paul said and then came back the next day? The word of God does not come back empty.

We are limited. Our God is not. Our God is unlimited. Limitless. And this is good news for us. We can observe and learn. We can engage. We can be given opportunities to proclaim the gospel. It is up to God to do the hard part. We cannot change hearts, only God can.

I'd like to finish this sermon by igniting our hearts, so we will desire to win over people with the gospel so much that we are willing to become anything to do so.

Why is the resurrection such good news? Congregation. What is the worst news you could ever hear? The answer is the same for all of us: Death. That is the worst news. That is our greatest fear. Our own death for sure, but the thought of getting a phone call and hearing that someone we love has died is hands down the worst news that we could ever hear. Every. Single. Human being has death in common. Death is the worst news. Death is our enemy. We should hate it, be angry about it, and grieve deeply for it.

Christians. While everyone carries the weight of the worst news, not all have the greatest news. We carry the message of the greatest news someone could ever hear. Death is reversed. Death has been overcome. There is such thing as eternal life. The resurrection of Christ ensures our own resurrection as Paul says in Romans 8, "If the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised the Messiah Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who lives in you" (Romans 8:11).

Christ's resurrection means that those in Christ live. We cannot hold that in while those around us do not know that that is a real! How? One way is to look at Paul and his strategy. However, in actuality, it wasn't originally Paul's strategy. From the book of Genesis, this was God's strategy. Genesis 3 God promises right after the fall that someday a child would be born to a woman. Our sin means we can't get to God, so God comes down to us. He becomes one of us. He sets up the framework and structure to his people for years and years to prepare for his arrival. Jesus, the Messiah, predicted throughout the Old Testament, became one of us. Was he a real human? Absolutely. He is 100% human and 100% divine.

Jesus shared our limitations as a human. He slept, ate, and went to the bathroom. He intentionally connected with people, he engaged and reasoned with them, and was given many platforms to preach. Many people he encountered believed and followed him. But others? Hearing his claim to be the son of God was too much. So, they mocked him and had his crucified. He died.

Our God is not limited by death. He overcame it. He reversed it and was raised from the dead. Hear the gospel he preached: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Congregation, we cannot keep that news to ourselves. May this be our hearts desire – to become anything to win over people for the sake of the gospel.

AMEN.