

## **“Even When No One Is Watching”**

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, May 21, 2017  
Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**Readings from Scripture: Acts 17:22-31 and 1 Peter 3:13-22**

*Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘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. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he 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 him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’*

*Acts 17:22-31*

*Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in*

*the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.*

*1 Peter 3:13-22*

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we are your people and you offer us your word, the living word. Be with us now as we reflect, we challenge, we hear your word for us this day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I try very hard to plan ahead in writing sermon summaries for the newsletter, for the music director who always wants them pretty early. Most of the time it works out just fine. I can go in the direction I thought I was going in and the sermon title makes sense. But sometimes the Spirit goes in a whole new direction, and that's what happened this week. This is one of those times. So if I could change the title for today, (and Roger I didn't do that so you didn't have to change it on the sign outside), I would change it to “Independent Minds Working Together”. I wish I could say that I made it up, but it's the motto of the College of Wooster, the Presbyterian College in Ohio that Scott and I attended. The saying itself, I think, is very Presbyterian because it reflects our understanding of faith to be lived out in the balance between the individual and the community in service to God. We are a connectional church made up of individuals and separate congregations, but we are called to work and serve together. We are a denomination committed to the pursuit of knowledge and of being in conversation with other faith traditions.

Growing up, though, I was one of the few Presbyterians in my neighborhood. Most of my friends were Catholic and then over the years I became friends with those who were Jewish and Greek Orthodox, along with some Presbyterians and Methodists and Lutherans. I never felt lonely, though. I may have felt different but I didn't feel lonely because due to that fact, ecumenism became a very important part of my life. I gained a lot of insight in talking with my friends about their faith and what it taught them. And not only did I learn about their tradition, I gained a better understanding of why and who I am as a Presbyterian. So when I went to Wooster, I had a lot more opportunities to study other faiths in courses on Judaism, denominations of America, the major faith traditions of the world. I loved those classes. They informed my understanding of history, the traditions of other people and the places I have never been to, and why they were so important to people of other traditions.

So earlier this year when I read about an event called Festival of Faith, I felt a pull to go because I wanted to have the chance to be in real dialogue with people among various faith communities that really wanted to come together and have conversation. The event was sponsored by the Center for Interreligious Dialogue in Louisville, Kentucky. This year the focus of the topic for the event was compassion. In our conversations we were reminded that compassion is a word whose roots mean “suffer with”, and that compassion requires a willingness to become uncomfortable and being aware of and responding to the challenges that others face. We heard from doctors and imams and pastors and theologians and rabbis and mayors, the former ambassador to the UK and a current member of congress. We heard about research going on regarding compassion for those who work with people in prison, and educators who teach mindfulness to

young children to give them new strategies to deal with times of anger or frustration.

The opening event took place at the local Catholic cathedral. An ambassador of the Muslim faith stood at the lectern and looked directly at the archbishop and thanked him for his courageous invitation allowing her to speak in the cathedral. The mayor of Louisville pointed out that we were in a church on Mohammad Ali Boulevard. Mohammad Ali was a former boxer, a very boisterous one. He was a Muslim and he became known for his generosity in service. He pointed out, though, that we were also two blocks from the point where the mystic, Thomas Merton, had his vision, a vision that transformed his life, led him to found Gethesemane and he experienced the sense of being connected with all of humanity and wanted to live out that vision. The whole event was a powerful reminder that there are many people seeking to build bridges and community. It was a time of Independent Minds working Together.

So with all this in mind, I was wondering about the reading from today's passage in Acts. Paul was a devoted Pharisee and as Saul, he was a stickler for the law. He came on the scene early in the church, not as an evangelist, but as a persecutor of those early Christians. So you can imagine how surprising it was to many of them, when they learned that Paul had a conversion experience and now he wanted to evangelize. Today's reading reminds us that he was ever the adamant evangelist—emphasis on adamant. We know he faced great challenges. Sometimes he was threatened. Other times he was imprisoned and on several occasions he was run out of town. It was interesting to read the various perspectives from scholars on this passage. Some considered it an example of suffering that Paul endured in the name of Christ. But another scholar saw it a little differently. He said ancient historians described “Athens as a very intellectually curious and religious place.” He thinks, “the writer of Acts is saying tongue-in-cheek that the Athenians would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” They just couldn't wait to hear what was coming down the pike. His sense, though, is that “Paul didn't go to Athens to preach. He was there to let things cool off. He had really stirred up the place he had been in before, and he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to come back and be with him.” But he can't help himself. He is an evangelist and he doesn't disappoint. Gentiles, he knew, do not know scripture, so instead he picks up on things he knows they can relate to so he quotes Greek poets. By doing this, “Paul lays the common ground with those people and tries to bring them into his way of thinking.” And some people are converted, but “the amusement of the crowd doesn't last and animosity rises again and he has to leave. So, while Paul had many converts, it seems that he left a trail of anger in a number of towns. **1**

There was a more harsh critique from a professor of Perkins Seminary. He said that “many people see this a model for evangelism of the intellectual world. They quote the material and then slip in a zinger, show them up and say there's only one way. He said, “I don't like this model of interfaith dialogue. I appreciate Paul's deep passion for the Gospel of Jesus. But today, if we are going to find ways to live with one another,” with those outside the faith, “we can't go that path. There can be no real dialogue with those with whom we don't agree unless we accept that we might have something to learn from them.” **2**

So what do we do with this passage? I think it's important to remember that Paul is key to spreading the Christian faith in the world. His work enabled the church not only to thrive but I think even to survive. He writes eloquent words to the Corinthians and the Philippians. They are pure poetry. But it is also important to understand the context in which Paul was preaching. He

was so sure, so sure, that Jesus was coming back in his lifetime that he had a sense of urgency. He wanted to save as many people as he could. And I also wonder did he feel badly about some of the things he had done before he was converted—the many people he had persecuted? But we are here, 2000 years later and the world is a different place. The need for connection and compassion with one another is vital. Sharing faith is not just about conversion, it's about conversation. It's not about bullying other people to see like you do. It's not about conversations that end in “gotcha”. These days finding common ground is so much more important.

That came up when we were discussing Krista Tippett's book, Becoming Wise. She's the NPR radio host and she sees that listening to others is so much the focus of her work. She begins the book by talking about the importance of having real conversations and they are more important in a time of anxiety and change. She said in her work she has learned that all too often we as people are quiet when others talk, but we are really only waiting until they're done so we can tell them what we think. She said, I think we need to approach this differently. She said, the questions we ask and how we ask them are important. She said she found if she asked someone, “Tell me about your spiritual life right now,” people found it to be off-putting and they shut down. But if she said, “Tell me about your spiritual experiences as a child, when you were growing up” that the stories flowed and the windows of dialogue opened up.

So as a group on Tuesday morning, we talked about some of our own experiences and how we felt when someone might say to us, “Have you been saved?” or “Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?” or “I'm going to pray for you” and never asking what it is that we would like to have prayed about. It made a number of us feel unsettled and judged. But it felt different if someone were to ask you a question about your childhood, or what brought you joy, or what shaped your understanding of the world as a child, who was important who mentored you when you were young? By asking them about their childhood, we invite people to tell us their stories. She said when we listen to each other's stories, we find places of common ground and we begin to understand one another. If we talk about our experiences regarding particular issues, instead of facts and having to be the winner in an argument, we begin to understand each other in new ways. We talk about experiences and we move into new territory. We can connect on different levels. In so doing we don't only learn about the other person, we get a better understanding of why we feel the way we do. We can grow in compassion and wisdom. We become Independent Minds Working Together.

I think she's right. We need to find our way out of thinking we always have to be right and be the winner, and consider what someone else may have to teach us. We need to build community and not walls. So if Paul were alive today, I think he might well agree with Krista Tippett. After all, he is the one who wrote that powerful phrase about the call to be unified not uniform—“unity not uniformity.” We also know that Paul was someone who worked so hard to bring together Christian Jews and Gentile Christians because both of them had come from such different worlds. He helped them to understand even though they had independent perspectives they could work together.

So Wooster's motto reminds me of the importance and the need to learn both as individuals and as a community. As I was researching I found out about one point in Wooster's history that became a difficult challenge. Because in the United States during the 1920s and some years before and after, the battle between the fundamentalists who believed in the literal truth of the Bible and the modernists who believed religion should progress with modern society became a huge battle, especially in the Presbyterian Church. Harry Emerson Fosdick, who was a very well-know

preacher in New York City, gave a famous sermon about the issue. He was very concerned because people were saying that other people, those who thought differently, should no longer be welcome in church. He was angry. “The question is: Has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points and to shut the doors of Christian fellowship? I see this morning the cause..... of the tolerance of Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

The issue played itself out at Wooster, as well, because William Jennings Bryan of the Scopes Monkey Trials, attacked the college because he learned they were including evolution in their curriculum. He wanted the national church to cut funding to the college, but the college's president stood firm. He understood the power and importance of Independent Minds Working Together. It was a helpful story for me to hear when I was back at Wooster a couple of weeks ago, because I had had some mixed feelings for a while. Twelve years ago I was sad to learn that some in the administration of the college had wanted to step back from focusing on our rich Presbyterian heritage. In the name of diversity and not offending anyone, those on campus weren't really encouraged to focus on our heritage of open minds and hearts. I was upset and I know I wasn't the only one, because I had loved being at Wooster because it had invited and encouraged all kinds of conversation. So I was happy to learn on this last trip that things had changed. The pastor of the college church said to me that the prior presidents who had tried to submerge the history are—well they're history now. The new president is a Quaker who honors and celebrates the past Presbyterian history and wants the college to reclaim it. It was a powerful reminder to me that we can both be who we are and learn from others. Seeking common ground is forging a common bond in the name of Christ.

Learning about other faiths does not undermine our faith or make us forget who we are, it may, in fact, help us to understand who we are even more and why we are and why we believe what we believe. Being in conversation with others is not about proving that we are right, it's about seeking to do what is good and right and faithful for all God's people. It encourages us to be independent minds working and serving the world together. May it always be so. Amen.

1 *Commentary*, Acts 17:22-31 (Easter 6A), Matt Skinner, Preaching This Week, *WorkingPreacher.org*, 2011 as found on Textweek.com

2 “*Interreligious Dialogue or Interreligious Monologue?*”, Reflections on Acts 17:-22-31 by John C. Holbert, Professor Emeritus of Perkins School of Theology, May 18, 2014 as found on Textweek.com.

3 “*William Jennings Bryan and the Scopes Monkey Trial*”, From the Presbyterian Historical Society, June 12, 2015 as taken from the website.