

Trying to Please

Acts 17:22-31 John 14:15-21

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

April 27, 2008

We live in a secular time and culture. In medieval days cities vied with one another to build the most magnificent cathedral. In America around the turn of the century cities vied with one another to build the tallest office building. Today cities vie with one another to have the largest sports arena and the most chic shopping and restaurant district.

Do you sometimes find yourself at a social gathering, chatting informally, and somehow it seems a little embarrassing to talk about going to church? You are not sure what opinion this person might have of you if he or she knew you were a regular churchgoer.

This secular culture we live in is, in a way, good for us as Christians. It keeps our faith from becoming too stale. Going to church, being a Christian, should be something that makes us a little "different". If someone was raised in a family that never went to church, if someone enjoys sleeping in on Sunday mornings, or goes to the beach, or catches up on chores around the house, or has a Sunday job ... if people are involved with school meetings, sports activities, civic duties, or spend every weekend camping in their RV with retired friends - what are they missing if church is not a part of their lives? What good will it do them to add a few church activities to their already busy schedules?

Something like that question faced Paul as he stood before a curious crowd in Athens, the center of Greek Philosophical thought. They wanted to hear about this new religion he espoused, and Paul may have been a bit intimidated. Paul was no slouch when it came to well reasoned arguments and flowery worded phrases. Now he was on stage in the center of Greek philosophical culture. How could he tell the story of Jesus in a way that would connect with their lives?

"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.'

We say we live in a secular society, but it is in fact a very religious secular society. We are surrounded by altars to all kinds of materialistic little gods to which people turn to find gratification and meaning, and still people are looking for something else out there, some unknown.... Paul understood how the people of Athens are like all people, including himself. They seek completion. They seek the mystery. They seek meaning in life.

"The God who made the world and everything in it," preached Paul, "being 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... 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." Paul tried to connect with the crowd. He tried to be complimentary, to find points of agreement between their cultural beliefs and the Christian proclamation, but he ended by telling them about a God that was very alien to their way of thinking. When Paul finished speaking the crowd mocked him.

“When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them...” (Acts 17:32-33)

Paul probably walked away thinking to himself, “I tried too hard.” He tried too hard to impress them on their own terms – to out orate the orators, to out debate the debaters, to out philosophize the philosophers. Perhaps because of such experiences as this, Paul would later write that the Gospel is the foolishness of God. It is useless to try and impress people into the faith.

Paul was a successful evangelist, most of the time. There are many accounts of people responding to his preaching. But Paul was also known for his “tent-making” ministry. That is, he lived among the people to whom he preached. He stayed in their communities and supported himself by plying his craft as a tent-maker. His words gained power because they were authentic to his life.

Paul’s preaching in Athens caused a few people to believe. His way of living caused more people to believe. And because those people believed, they began to live differently. And because they lived differently, many more came to believe and to live differently, to follow the Way of Jesus. The witness of the Christian community was effective because Christian lives were distinctive. And Christian lives were distinctive both because of what they weren’t doing and what they were doing. They weren’t trying to please through accommodation. They weren’t trying to impress or to gain praise. They were following Jesus’ way of self-giving love.

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

The Spirit of Truth is not something we learn from the world. The world tries to teach us how to impress friends and influence people.

Steve Islander tells the story about being a sophomore in high school back in the sixties and riding the school bus home. On this particular day, he was late getting on, along with several other boys. As usual, they had been fooling around and had almost missed the bus. Consequently, the really choice seats located in the very back of the bus were already occupied. The only ones left were in the very front directly behind the driver. So, there they sat. As the bus was preparing to turn left off of Pacific Coast Highway onto Hawthorne Boulevard, they came up behind a Corvette convertible with the top down. It was the car every one of those boys dreamed he would own someday. From the front of the bus they had a clear view of the car through the large front windows. Behind the wheel was a man and sitting next to him was a beautiful redhead. Her luscious amber red locks flowed off her head and down over her shoulders in waves. Her head rested gently on the man’s shoulder. All the boys in the front of the bus were spellbound. Even the usually stoic bus driver made a comment that confirmed his awe.

The man in the Corvette was living the life they imagined they would someday live. He had it all: a great car, a beautiful girlfriend. They imagined themselves in his place.

Just then, the beautiful redhead lifted her head and turned to look into the man’s face with loving, adoring eyes. There was an audible gasp from the boys in the front of the bus as they came to the sudden realization that the ravishing beauty was in fact an Irish Setter.

The “American Dream” never quite comes into focus. There is always something slightly askew. The world’s picture of what constitutes the good life is a false image. Another colleague confessed that he covets the thought of owning a luxury automobile. But he can’t afford one. So he did his own research. While stuck in traffic on the freeway he examined closely the faces of those persons who were driving the luxury cars he can’t afford to buy. He couldn’t find one person who looked like they were truly happy to be where they were: behind the wheel of some dream machine in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the freeway.

We believe that the world cannot give us anything comparable to what God has already given us. Therefore we are freed from the compulsion to impress and to please.

Live what you believe. Our lives should be distinctive. Jesus sent seventy disciples out with a mission, telling them that he sent them to be “lambs among wolves.” The instruction was not to be better wolves, but to be distinctly different in character. As Lily Tomlin has said in one of my favorite quotes: “the problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat.”

So this is the challenge before us today: what distinguishes life as a Christian? More specifically, in what way shall your life and my life be distinct because we follow Jesus? Jesus said, “You know [the Spirit of Truth], because he abides in you.”

- Be a person that cares more about caring than status.
- Be a leader that cares more about justice than votes – more about being right than being popular.
- Be a judge that cares more about restoration than retribution – more about rehabilitation than revenge.
- Be a preacher that cares more about truth than praise.
- Be a corporate executive that cares more about the common good than the bottom line.
- Be a schoolteacher that cares more about kids than tenure – more about encouraging creativity than not rocking the boat.
- Be a student that cares more about learning than grades – more about responding to God’s call than successfully working the system.
- Be a parent that cares more about relationships than accomplishments.
- Be a person who rather than indulging the self, sacrifices for the sake of love.
- Be a Church member that cares more about mission than comfort –
- more about being present with tortured souls than being seen with influential people –
- more about being the Church that meets people’s needs than being in a church that meets all of “my” needs.
- Be a follower of Jesus and your life will be different, distinct and distinguishable.

We are pleased to know that we are loved by God; therefore we no longer need feel compelled to please the world. Finally the Gospel frees us.

Therefore let us be people committed to love. Not people committed to making a name for ourselves, not people looking over our shoulders to see if someone is telling us we are doing a good job, not people anxious to please because we want so much that everyone would be pleased with us. Let us be people with the assurance of God's love in our souls, and thus able and committed to share God's love with all God’s children.

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