

Rising to the Challenge
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Acts 17:16-31

According to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life, 89% of American adults say they believe in God.¹

Is that good news for churches? I guess it depends on how that 89% breaks down. Turns out that number reflects people with wildly different levels of belief.

- Only 63% reported that they were absolutely certain God exists.
- 20% reported that they're fairly certain God exists.
- 5% said believe in God, but they're not too certain.
- And then there's the 1% who say they believe, but just don't know.

So even among those who say they believe in God, there's a mighty big chunk of folks who have reservations. Not only that, but the survey sample included people of all kinds of faith: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, and people who are religiously unaffiliated... people who don't attend any church, synagogue, mosque, or temple.

So even though 89% in the survey say they believe in God, we're not really sure what they mean. And the news doesn't get much better when we dig deeper into what Christians actually believe²

For example, 45%—that's almost half of all Christians surveyed—thought that the Golden Rule is one of the Ten Commandments.

And 55% of Christians—that's more than half—didn't know that there are four Gospels in the canonical New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

About a third of all Christians—34%—couldn't correctly identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible.

¹ Benjamin Wormald. "Religious Landscape Study." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. May 11, 2015. Accessed April 23, 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god/>.

² Joseph Liu. "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. September 28, 2010. Accessed April 23, 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/28/u-s-religious-knowledge-survey/>.

Here's what's really interesting about these figures. When the researchers looked really closely at their data, they found that skeptics and atheists tended to know the Bible better than most Christians. On the surface, that might seem like cause for alarm. But it's not. At least from where I stand.

Here's why I am hopeful about these survey results, and why you should be too: we're pretty much living in the world we heard about in our story today.

Most everyone Paul encountered in his missionary journeys were yearning for something. And in Athens, among the diversity of religious thought and practice, the Christian church blossomed and bloomed.

I feel hopeful because all these statistics mean is that God has given us a new opportunity TODAY to be more creative and resourceful in how we spread the word about Jesus. In fact, I'm not just hopeful. I'm downright optimistic. I'll tell you why at the end of the sermon.

Let's take a few minutes to dig deeper into our story, to see how Paul spread the news about Jesus to people who needed to hear it.

If there had been airplanes at the time of Paul, he would've logged a million travel points visiting booming port cities and dusty little hamlets all around the Mediterranean.

On this particular trip, Paul has been run off from Berea to Athens. He's now proclaiming the good news of Jesus and the Resurrection in both the Synagogue and the Marketplace as he waits for his companions Timothy and Silas to catch up with him.

Athens was a diverse place when it came to religion and philosophy. In Athens, people were encouraged to find their own truth, to make their own choices, so long as they didn't interfere with the choices of others. Almost anything was tolerated, as long as it didn't spill out and bother someone else—and even if it did, well, those who took offense were considered closed-minded, not enlightened.

As Paul is ministering, he is bothered by the Athenian gods and philosophies. He's concerned because he suspects that these ideas are stealing life from people and leading them down dark paths. To understand why, we must learn a little about two of the philosophies mentioned in the reading: Epicureans and Stoics.

Epicureans were basically hedonists. They believed that the gods were composed of atoms so fine that they dwelt in the space between the worlds. Since the Gods are so small, they are powerless and don't really care about human beings. If this life really is all there is, why not live it up? Enjoy as much pleasure as you can. Think of a society modelled on that classic movie "Animal House" – that's how Epicureans thought life should be, a party 24/7.

The Stoics were pantheists, who believed a god was in everything, similar to today's Hindus. Stoics were all about self-control, lest they unintentionally anger one of their gods. Their ideal was to live a calm and unperturbed life, above any emotional highs or lows. If pain doesn't bother you; then pleasure doesn't seduce you. When you think of Stoics, think of Spock from Star Trek.

Paul proclaims the Resurrection, which stands against both of these philosophies. He tells them there is more to this life than meets the eye. He pleads with them, saying that pleasure isn't going to make them feel any less empty inside. He challenges the Athenians; saying that ignoring the shortcomings of this world (like poverty and injustice) is not only irresponsible, but it doesn't make them go away.

Resurrection gives us hope that evil and sin can truly be overcome. God can take all of the things that cause pain in this world: war, bad relationships, loneliness—and resurrect life out of them, when we follow Jesus of Nazareth's path of loving neighbor, God and self. To their ears, and to many of us now, the Resurrection sounded pretty strange. And in Paul's day, it was a completely different way to understand God.

When we human beings create our gods, we want them to do things predictably, in accordance with our wishes and desires. That's how it was, for most of Paul's Greek listeners. Their interest was piqued when they heard about a God that operates so radically different from what their well-crafted, highly-developed, logical human philosophies would expect.

Paul's approach was a masterful one. He doesn't begin by bashing the various idols and the people who worshipped them as one would expect in a standard debate. To the contrary, he complimented them on their religiosity. He recognized the importance of their faith and used the opportunity to tell them who God is and how He's different from the gods they know.

Paul didn't try to pull the Greeks into Christianity with a slick promotional campaign. He didn't attempt to entice them with entertainment, giving them

something to dazzle and amaze that was a radical departure from the life the people of the Way actually practiced.

Confidently and clearly, Paul gave his audience words that turned their unknown god into the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. The God of Moses and Miriam, and David, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah. The God who is known best through what he has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul spoke to a bunch of philosophically and religiously diverse people. Some didn't know what they believed. And a lot of them probably only half-believed what they believed. They didn't know there were Ten Commandments, or a golden rule.

Without bashing them over the head with scripture, Paul still touched their hearts and turned them towards Christ. This is why I'm incredibly hopeful that we can still reach people today. Even if they don't know how they feel about God yet. And even if they don't know a thing about the Bible.

Church: We've got this.

If we follow the example Paul set on Mars Hill, we might learn to engage our culture on its own terms. That doesn't mean we compromise the message of love, mercy, grace and justice. But it does mean that we must be smart about the methods we use.

What we see in Paul—not just here, but throughout his ministry—is that he worked to understand his audience on their own terms. He listened to them. He learned about their fears, their joys, their sorrows. And that's what he spoke to them about, in ways they could understand and relate to.

Our major challenge in reaching people today is shifting our thinking from “*we have a great church, why don't more people show up?*” to sitting down with a colleague, neighbor or friend and finding out first what they are seeking in their heart and soul, and then telling them about a place and a people who will love them and can help them on their journey.

That involves real talk. And going deep. And maybe not all of us are that sure of ourselves when we talk about our faith. Along the way we were told there's a right way and a wrong way to talk about faith. Or we've gotten into

an argument with someone who has strongly held beliefs who told us to either think like them or get lost.

Remember near the beginning of the message, how I said I'm not only hopeful this church can meet the challenges our culture presents; but I'm downright optimistic that we can?

Here's why I'm optimistic: We're already taking steps to do just that.

For example, Our Strawberry Festival co-chairs have made a concerted effort these past few years to inform the community about the Outreach we are able to do through the funds we raise. I don't think it would be too much to claim that Strawberry Festival not only helps us to engage the culture around us, but it offers a little bit of the Kingdom of God to break in.

Engaging the culture looks like offering a Vacation Bible School to our community's children that is affordable and accessible. Helping children understand what a blessing it is to live in "God's Backyard" and what our responsibilities are to care for it. This is a great way to engage our neighbors. VBS gives clear witness to our values as a people committed to leaving this world in better shape than we found it.

I know, there are many more. But I've already preached longer than I usually do, so I'm going to wrap it up with a challenge for you. This week, pay close attention to the culture that surrounds you. Watch your favorite secular TV shows and movies, books and magazines. Listen to secular music and news programs. And as you do, ask yourself: *Can I find anything here to make me a better communicator of God's love and grace?*

Then look at your friends, neighbors, co-workers and ask yourself: *Who do I need to sit down with for some real talk? Who do I know that is struggling, and how can I connect them with this way of life?* Then make a date to meet them for coffee and tell them about what this church, this community, this faith, has done for you.

What other ways can you think of for us to engage the culture we find ourselves in? There are countless numbers of people we can reach in this time and place. May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.