

May 25, 2014
Acts 17:16-31
“Areopagus, NC”
Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor

Julie’s next-door neighbor is divorced, unemployed, is battling breast cancer, and is not a church-goer. Julie’s been praying for her neighbor; but she’s not sure what she should say to her friend about God.

Frank’s college roommate is a biology major, and an atheist. They get along really well; but Frank doesn’t bring up the topic of religion, or talk about his own faith. He doesn’t want to make his relationship with his roommate uncomfortable.

Joe and Sharon’s three adult children are all married, with good jobs, and are raising kids of their own; but all three of them no longer go to church. They’re too busy, and too caught up in their kids’ activities and their own social and professional lives. Joe and Sharon lovingly lecture their adult children about this every so often; but don’t seem to be making an impact.

Julie, Frank, Joe and Sharon ... they’re not alone, are they? We all know people, we all interact with individuals, we all probably have friends or family members or neighbors who are not Christians. We go to work with, attend school with, play softball with, hang out at the senior center with, live next door to people who don’t know Jesus, people who don’t believe in Jesus, people who don’t have time for Jesus.

What do **we** say? What do **we avoid** talking about with them? What conversations does God want us to be having with these people?

Today, in our Bible story, we see Paul the apostle. He's on a mission trip. Paul travels from city to city. He's trying to plant churches, aiming to win converts, attempting to spread the Gospel.

And how does he do it? Paul talks to people. Paul strikes up conversations with people like Julie's next-door neighbor, like Frank's college roommate, like Joe and Sharon's adult children. He gets to know them. He hears their stories. Paul shows interest in what they believe in, and he looks for opportunities to share a few words about what he believes.

Read verse 16 with me, as the story begins. Paul is hanging out in the Greek city of Athens, waiting for his helpers, Silas and Timothy, to join him. How does he spend his time? Let's read verse 16 together: "While Paul was waiting for them at Athens, ***his spirit was provoked within him*** as he saw that the city was full of idols."

Paul is upset because he sees on the streets of Athens statues, figurines, altars, and temples of the many, many Greek gods that the people of Athens worshipped. But, notice, please, that Paul doesn't go bonkers, or get all judgmental, about it. He doesn't get up on a soapbox and start screaming. We'll see in a moment what he does do.

But first let me ask you this. Don't you think that our American cities today are full of idols, too? People in our society are worshipping money, status, security, fashion, physical fitness, celebrities, technology. There's not necessarily anything wrong with any of these things; but it's wrong when we put these things before God. Americans have made idols of all kinds of things.

Sometimes, as people of God, our spirits can be provoked within us, too, when we see the way our culture is drifting,

changing, slipping away from God. How do we respond? What do we do? Let's go back to brother Paul's story.

Here's what Paul does, when he sees all those idols in Athens. Let's read verse 17: "So he **reasoned** in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace with those who happened to be there." Paul doesn't start preaching fire and brimstone at all the heathens. He reasons with them. Paul talks with people – with religious people, and non-religious people. He visits the synagogues to have conversations with the people there, and he goes every day down to the Triangle Town Center mall (it says here, "the marketplace") to talk with those who happened to be there.

And God uses these conversations. God would use our conversations, too.

Paul runs into, one day, some philosophers. You walk around in downtown Raleigh, and you might encounter a street musician or a food truck vendor. In Athens, I guess, there were philosophers walking around. Paul chats these philosophers up, hears their stories, engages in conversations; and he ends up being invited to come up to the Areopagus. This was the site of the highest court in the land, and it was a place where the philosophers and the deep-thinkers of Athens gathered to debate ideas and worldviews. Paul's religious views were new, and his words about a resurrected, living Savior who was the Son of the one true God, were being heard for the first time in Athens. So Paul is invited to give a guest lecture, if you will, at the Areopagus – and we heard his sermon, his testimony, his call to faith in Jesus, in our reading.

Now, none of us are St. Paul. I get that. But God wants all of us Christians to be talking to people, to be hearing their

stories, to be participating in conversations, to be finding out what other people believe – and, perhaps most important of all, to be looking for those precious opportunities to share what we believe, what we've experienced in Jesus.

We do that here; but, in our congregation, we have people who work in state and local governments, in education, health professions, entertainment industries, pharmaceuticals, banking, insurance, technology, building trades, research, retail stores, office buildings, and so many more sectors of society. We live in the Heritage neighborhoods close by; but we live in Youngsville, Knightdale, Creedmoor, Raleigh, Zebulon, and so many more communities beyond Wake Forest.

We know people, lots of people. We interact and connect with people, and have thousands and thousands of conversations daily. And I want you to think today about how God might just want to use one or two of your conversations this week for the kingdom.

Like Paul, God wants you and me to look for those opportunities to share Jesus, to give testimony to Jesus, to just talk about Jesus. We don't have to be judgmental, or harangue anybody. Like Paul, we can just begin where the other person is, talk about that person's life and beliefs, and look for those golden opportunities to talk about Jesus.

Is there an Areopagus here in North Carolina? I say there is. It's where Julie sits down to talk to her neighbor, where Frank spends time with his college roommate, where Joe and Sharon share family time with their adult children. And it's where you live, where you work or go to school, where you like to hang out with your friends, where you spend your time online. Areopagus, North Carolina is wherever God gives you opportunity to have conversations that he can use.

Let's pray.