

From the Pastor' Jeff's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, May 14, 2023

It goes by a couple of different metaphors – spheres, mountains, occasionally pillars – but amongst a certain branch of our Christian family tree, there are those who believe that the Church must be committed to leadership in, even dominance over, seven areas of our shared life together: religion, family, education, government, business, media, and arts/entertainment. These are, to settle on a metaphor for the sake of this sermon, the seven spheres of social influence in our lives and thus, at least for these Christians, they are the seven spheres that disciples must be empowered to engage for the sake of the Gospel.

This is why you may have had the experience of attending a public event where an Evangelical pastor is invited to give the invocation and what you receive instead is a sermon with everything but an altar call. Meanwhile, you're like, "I was hoping someone would just quickly bless this stuffed chicken breast dinner and Caesar salad. And maybe send the waitress back over to refill my unsweetened iced tea?" Such awkward invocations find their genesis in this seven spheres reasoning.

Now, there's no reason to accept any of this as true or in any way as an expectation on your Christian discipleship, but let's hang with this thought for a moment as an exercise in empathy. Imagine that, for you, seeing Christian values reflected in religion, family, education, government, media, and arts/entertainment is important to your sense of security and well-being. What, then, in looking at these areas would you see? You'd see diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace as an overturning of traditional norms. You'd see education foisting indoctrination on your children. You'd see government run amok with paternalism and impropriety. You would be, undoubtedly, distressed and agitated.

I start here for a couple of reasons. First, I don't think we can be blissfully ignorant of what other churches – churches in our community, churches impacting the lives of our friends and neighbors – we can't be ignorant of what they are doing. For, to be sure, some of them are doing true spiritual harm, especially to those whose lives are perceived as a threat to orderliness in these seven spheres. We should also be aware of what other churches are doing, in case there are best practices we can adopt. Clearly, I don't think "seven spheres" thinking reaches that threshold, but we should never give up on the Proverbial wisdom of "iron sharpening iron" either. Most importantly, though, I start here because our reading from Acts – with Paul at the Areopagus – is a central text for how Christians are taught to engage in each of these seven, secular spheres. This is, at any rate, how I was taught it. If you are, like me, an "Evangelical," then I'm guessing you're picking up what I'm putting down. If you're not, I promise this sermon will still prove meaningful to your own life of faith. Just give me a little space and receive the next few moments with curiosity and compassion.

Our story begins with Paul being brought to the Areopagus in Athens, which is a place where – and this is worth quoting – "all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in *nothing but* telling or hearing something new." He was brought there because, in his frustration, he had basically made himself persona non grata in both the local synagogue and the marketplace. Well, the rest of the story is simple enough – he sees an idol dedicated to an unknown god and he proceeds to leverage this unknowingness into an opportunity to proclaim Jesus Christ. It's a great little rhetorical move that begins when he says, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Brilliant!

Can you see how appealing this story is to "seven spheres" Christians? It's not that Paul had to come and proclaim Jesus crucified, risen, and Lord out of the blue. No, Paul gets to take something familiar to the Athenians and manipulate that into a quasi-familiarity with Jesus Christ – in form, at least, if not content. He can basically say, "Hey, you're halfway to worshipping Jesus already; here's the other half!" Again, these seven sphere Christians seize on this story as a blueprint for evangelism and church growth. They espy within this narrative a model for conquering every sphere in the name of Jesus Christ. They'll even go so far as to claim that because God created everything, God left enough fingerprints behind that we should be able to look into any sphere and find cause to proclaim the gospel. The power in this story for these "seven sphere Christians" is that it shows that the gospel is relevant. And since even these Christians exist in a society where the church is seen as less and less meaningful year after year, anything that gives them a little jolt of relevancy is as tempting as any idol Paul was surrounded by in Athens.

This is why, even as this is a riveting approach, to be sure, it's also willfully wrong-headed. For while the story does end with some wanting to hear more and others wanting to hear less, the real conclusion occurs when Paul... walks away. Poof! Gone. Done-zo! Fin. Or, as the text relates it to us: "At that point, Paul left them." Interestingly, any reference to anyone actually becoming a Christian only occurs after this *and* after those people also leave the Areopagus. I'm convinced that separation from a place where people "spend their time in *nothing but* telling or hearing something new" is necessary if we're going to live out the gospel, not just yammer ceaselessly about it. It's like the difference between being a Christian and listening to a podcast about Christianity.

Living out the gospel is a nice segue to our reading from 1 Peter, which is the following chapter after what we discussed last week. Last week I noted that Peter provided a good example of what it means to have our ethics – that is, how we live well in the world – extend from our identity – that is, who we are and have been made in Christ Jesus.

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Last week was much more about our identity and as evidence that identity precedes ethics, this week is much much more about ethics. Just consider how the passage begins... with an interrogative that ends in the quote “do what is good.” Yep! We’re in ethical territory now!

Indeed, even when Peter moves to the topic of verbal proclamation when he instructs us to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you,” the real ethical imperative is *not* to be prepared to talk, but rather to be prepared to talk “with gentleness and reverence.” In this, I’m reminded of Marshal McLuhan, who is largely regarded as a cornerstone of media theory, because it is McLuhan who coined the phrase “the medium is the message.” We might simplify that beyond the scope that McLuhan would be comfortable with by saying that *how* we say something is more determinative of what people hear than *what* we say. We can speak the smartest truths, the wisest words, the profoundest profundity, but if we do it with a snarl in our voice, or sarcasm in our souls, or with lettuce in our teeth, folks just aren’t going to hear us... they’re just going to stare at that lettuce, real or proverbial.

Contrary the seeming relevance of the gospel as Paul talks at the Areopagus, Peter presents to us a different form of relevance: The relevancy of goodness. But before anyone can be expected or able to do anything good, they have to let go of fear, forsake intimidation, and do so by what Peter describes as “in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” That’s a really pretty turn of phrase, but what it means isn’t immediately clear. I hear the phrase “in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord” and all of the sudden I’m David on *Schitt’s Creek* trying figure out what it means to “fold in the cheese.” What does it mean to sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart?

Well, at the very least, it probably means letting go of cultural relevancy as a meaningful category altogether. Being relevant – or in the parlance of younger generations, being an influencer – is a worthless task if Christ is Lord. And that’s because any true Lordship is not open to the whims of public approval, of clicks, of likes, or of any other metric that measures power. “Lord” is powerful enough that it need not pander to other, lesser forms of social or relational power. We are able to let go of our fears – fears that the world is spinning out of control, fears that coercion and corruption lurk around every corner, fears that the kids won’t be alright, fears that “they” (whoever “they” are!) are winning and we’re losing – we can let go of this all because Christ is Lord and our hearts are sanctified in that reality.

In the place of all these attempts to be relevant – attempts that are undoubtedly a result of fears and intimidation – we are instead offered an opportunity to do good. We do good where we can, not as an extension of some strategy, not because we’re trying to win the debate, not even because we

want to win converts; we do good where we can, not because we think it’ll grow membership or shore up the budget or prove to ourselves that the faith we’ve been living our whole lives is relevant to people under 30; we do good where we can because this is the relevancy that God has chosen for God’s self. We do good because goodness is more substantive than even the most brilliant rhetorical tricks. We do good because good is more powerful than having dominion over all seven spheres. We do good because we are God’s people.

Our identity is found in our God who is love. It is found in our God who is good. If then, we belong to this God and this is who we are, we must be people who love and do good. Anything less is an inversion of the ethics-extend-from-identity principal that makes any ethic intelligible in the first place. And our love and the good we do with it are not contingent upon seven spheres functioning correctly, anymore than the Lordship of Jesus Christ is contingent upon the seven spheres proclaiming His name. No, our God-inspired love and Christ-gifted goodness are sufficient within themselves, carry gravitas enough without further appeal to any other source. And the fact of this is, if we even need to keep using this word, relevant to all those who are also seeking to eschew fear, embrace love, and do good.

Of course, you all already know this, don’t you? You’ve been practicing this, long before I just preached it. I mean, did you know that I wrote 300 pages in a dissertation about precisely *why* the church needs to do good with and for the LGBTQIA+ community? And then, like a month after defending that dissertation I get the offer to be the pastor at this church. And in my head I was like, “Hey! What a great fit! I’ve got so much to share with them that I know they’ll appreciate better than most churches!” And then after nine months here no one has asked me to read my 300-page dissertation to them! Talk about feelings of irrelevancy!

But also, I’m glad to be irrelevant in this way. I’m grateful that my 300 pages aren’t relevant here because you already found your way to doing good without the lengthy backstory. You’ve discovered, embraced, and embodied doing good without an overarching theory of seven spheres to motivate it all. You’re doing good not to prove that Jesus is Lord, but because Jesus is Lord. You’ve already made like Paul and walked away from all the noise of those who just want to hear themselves speak and you’ve accepted that anything you have to say is best said in how you live. So, yeah, maybe not the most inspiring end to a sermon, but – uh – let’s keep doing that.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.