

***Pastor Triolo's October 8, 2017 sermon based on Acts 17;
the Gospel was Luke 10:1-12.***

PoWeR SuRGe: Relate

The most important lesson our faith teaches us is this: God takes your death and gives you His life. This is the heart of the Gospel. Everything we do as Christians and as a Christian congregation should flow from this simple yet profound truth.

Today I want to reflect on another important lesson: how we relate. How we relate with others and how we relate the Gospel to them. Our list of ministries at St. Mark's—and there are over a hundred!—contains many wonderful ways God's people are making a difference in the lives of others. But it does not contain a single intentional effort for equipping and sending disciples to relate the Gospel to others. If we are to be faithful to our call as Christians and as a congregation, this must change. We must engage our communities and relate the Gospel to them. Part of being disciples of Jesus includes discipling others.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus sent seventy disciples into the surrounding villages and towns, to the very places he himself intended to go. They went in pairs and had a seemingly simple message to share: the peace of God be with you. If their peace was received, they were to remain in that place, live among the people for a while, and relate the good news that the Kingdom of God had come near. Can you imagine doing this today? If you are like most Lutherans, the answer is no. But, to be serious about our call to disciple others, we need to begin to reimagine this possibility.

Let me tell you how the Spirit caught my imagination this week regarding this. This past week at St. Mark's, I had one of those experiences when the Spirit gives you the same message in two different ways. It couldn't have been more clear as the messages came just an hour apart. The first was during a conversation about making new connections with our neighbors, particularly those of other faiths. We talked about the need to have some understanding of the cultures of those around us in order to be more effective with these relationships. For example, if a pair of St. Mark's members rings a doorbell and a woman answers the door, it might be completely inappropriate in her culture for a man to engage her in conversation. If I am the one to greet her, the interaction may get no farther than, "hello." Facts like these are important to know.

An hour later I was in our Tuesday evening Bible study—"Dwelling in God's Word: Acts" edition. We read chapter 17 where Paul is in Athens. There are several excellent speeches in Acts. The apostles share their faith eloquently time and again. Throughout the first 16 chapters, these speeches were given mainly to Jews. The messages were similar. They'd talk about the law of Moses, quote the prophets, and explain how the Messiah was to suffer, die, and rise again. They explained that God took our sin and gave us His life using the Jewish Bible, or as we know it, the Old Testament.

Paul did something very different in Athens. Listen to him. What do you hear?

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.

My first observation about this speech: Paul met the Athenians where they were. He looked at their temple and said, look, here’s a statue to an unknown god. You’ve been looking for him. Let me tell you about Him. Opportunities to share your faith will rarely just materialize. In both Luke and Acts disciples needed to go where the people were.

Second observation: Meeting them where they were appears to have required some advance preparation. Paul did not quote the Old Testament to them. He quoted to them their own poets and philosophers. Your neighbors, friends, and coworkers have their own cultures and worldviews. It is important to listen to them and take the time to learn about them.

Third observation: Paul used the words of those writers as a way to connect with the people and introduce them to God. Where do the cultures and experiences of the people in your life connect with your faith story? These intersections are where you will find the greatest opportunity to share the Good News about Jesus.

Fourth observation: Paul didn’t even mention Jesus by name in his first conversation. His goal was to engage them and to make connections between their experience and God’s activity. Sharing the Gospel takes time. It begins with the slow process of developing a relationship built on mutual respect and appreciation for the other.

Like one of the seventy sent by Jesus into the surrounding communities, Paul went from town to town, city to city, relating the Good News about Jesus. He did this by first relating to the people. He learned about their customs and cultures and shared the Good News in a way that might connect with them. God is calling us to this same task! As disciples we are sent to relate to others and to relate the Good News to them.

As you came into worship this morning, you should have received a bag of stones with a card inside. It might look familiar to you. I gave out something similar over the summer. Each one of us has a sphere of influence. As we prepare to make new connections in our communities, I want you to prayerfully consider one person in each circle with whom you might relate. This should be someone who does not currently worship at a Christian church. Assign one stone for each person. Carry the stones with you as a reminder to pray that God might open their hearts and minds to the Gospel. Pray for them every day. Then, as you connect with them and begin to relate to them, bring those stones back to St. Mark’s. We will place our stones in this jar and we will pray for everyone we are relating to. This jar will serve as a reminder and a testimonial for us.

God takes your death and gives you His life. This most important lesson we learn in church is God’s message for all people. May God help and guide us as we share it.