

Bookends of a Divine Plan
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Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, May 1, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA

Acts 17:22-31

“He who is the Lord who made the world and everything in it, ... does not live in shrines made by human hands...”

This small pill could kill you. It could cause indigestion, anxiety, night sweats, heart palpitations, and dizziness, loss of hair, double vision, blindness, hypertension, hyperactivity, hypersensitivity, mood swings, indecision, drowsiness, and additional digit growth. Yet this pill offers hope, promise, salvation, a better life, a better relationship with your spouse, children, grandchildren, will help your dog learn Tai Chi, will offer you a small cartoon man to walk with you, will lead you to food which resembles your likeness, and will assist you with the unmentionable. This small pill could save you and it could kill you.

In the marketing world, your label is your identity, and a good marketing scheme is very deliberate in defining what that label represents. Hence the brilliance of the drug company’s marketing is that a confusing label is still given a very positive tangible message, and despite all of the warnings we hear, the majority of individuals still tend to connect the product label with the favorable possibilities the pill represents. Thanks to advertising, the label means something good and hopeful.

We all look for labels, claim some kind of identity and assume that people know what our labels mean. It is a way to quickly share something about you without having to go into detail. Think about this in the sports world. If you are a fan of the Red Sox, then you most likely have some kind of animosity towards the Yankees, but you don’t have to say it. If you are an Eagles fan then you most likely have some kind of animosity towards just about every other team. And if you live in Philadelphia and you aren’t an Eagles fan, than you most likely have some kind of death wish. Or think about our labels in other aspects of our lives. In the work world we have blue collar and white collar. We have labels for one’s geographic home (Southerner, New Yorker, and Southie – from Boston). We have labels for schools, lifestyles, and on and on. The labels give us hints and clues and are a way we can share about ourselves. Whether we agree with them or not, the labels are used to give someone an identity, and share some information. There are many, many labels that offer telling volumes about products and people.

Now imagine Paul walking through Athens as we read in Acts. He is in a sea of labels of the religious market place. He is working his way through the crowd; he is pushing from one belief and then to the other. Rows and rows of tents offering idols, ideas, and ideologies are set up for anyone interested. Stoics, Epicureans, Gnostics, Jews, and many others are all gathered, selling something, hoping to entice the passer by; each one has a label, an identity, and something to offer.

Maybe you can see yourself with Paul, walking through the religious market place, surrounded and overwhelmed by the large diversity and sheer volume of those trying to sell their wares. The only difference is, in our market place we seem to be surrounded by other churches. We turn and see churches choosing and offering labels that represent who they are in hopes that a passer-by can be enticed.

The church of accommodation has a drive through window for confessions and communion.

The church of silence offers a safe place for people to sit and not do much but listen.

The church of yelling spends a lot of time being angry with one group of people or another.

The church of the “bling” and glitz has a pastor with a very expensive suite, fancy, nice clothes and a lot of gold plating.

We see Christians of righteousness, zealous Christians, angry Christians, questioning Christians, conservative and liberal Christians yelling at each other. As a Baptist church we run into the difficulty of

labels more and more. “What kind of Baptist are you?” What kind of church are you? What kind of Christian are you? Labels have become important, especially in our new religious marketplace because it is a way for us to categorize and understand people without really getting to know them. Like in the novel, *Brave New World*, where humans are engineered to be a specific type of person and perform a specific type of task, each church, each person is given a label and placed in a class that performs a duty, task, and holds certain characteristics with very little social mobility. Some churches preach, some churches praise, and some churches pray. Ethnic churches, age specific churches, we have a church for everyone (I haven’t even touched the non-religious spiritualists). This is the marketplace in which we wander with Paul, meandering our way through the labyrinthine alleys of the marketplace. We are surrounded by competing merchants selling their wares, like competing politicians at a rail stop, claiming and offering labels for themselves and for others.

Then someone grabs us, someone stops us, and asks for our label. They want to know who we are, because they have seen us, heard about us, and need to know how to categorize us. They grabbed Paul because what he preached did not fall into the easy trappings of idol worship, he would not side with a zealous, Pharisaic following of the law, and he would not stay silent about his new ideas of the Christ. They grabbed Paul, and demanded to know how to label him. Is he a Stoic, devoicing himself of all emotion, or is he an Epicurean working to enjoy life, and live life to its fullest? They grabbed Paul, and demanded to know whom he was and what religious idea was he trying to hock. This is where we find him as we read the scriptures today, standing in front of the Areopagus, explaining his own identity.

Someone grabs us as well and wants to know who we are. What kind of church are we? What kind of Christians are we? How are we to be labeled? Maybe you have been in this situation before – “you’re a Christian aren’t you, what do you think about ...” It seems like we are asked to show our label with every issue and concern that comes across the landscape. From Terri Sciavo's end of life dilemma to the filibuster in the Senate to our view of the death penalty, to creationism and evolutionism, with each issue we are pushed to flash our label, our card, and let people know what kind of Christian we are and where we stand. And now the spotlight is placed upon you, the mike is in your hand and all eyes are upon you. It is like the national political party conventions when a candidate is introduced – this is his (and someday her) opportunity to really tell the people who he or she is. We’ve been noticed, and now people what to know how to treat us. What is our label, what is our category so we can be understood?

Are you ready? Are you ready to share your position, to offer your label so that you can also hock your religious wares? Are you ready to draw the line in the sand and claim your own territory? Because if you don’t then you will most likely be labeled, you will be placed, a spot will be found for you. Your social standing will be marked with or without your consent. The Biblical scholars, Malina and Neyrey discuss in great detail the honor and shame resting upon claiming your own space or being labeled. A question of our identity is a challenge of our worth in society, and when we share nothing, and then we are at the mercy of other's opinions. Paul’s honor is at stake as his credibility is challenged as he is challenged, and ours is as well. We can’t just walk away; instead we have to answer. So are you ready to explain yourself, to claim who you are as a Christian when a member of the vast religious market grabs you, demands to know who you are, and asks for a label?

When you do take a stand and proclaim who you are, be bold, be brave, and be authentic, because this is a moment of truth. This will not be easy if you are honest. It will not be easy if you are straightforward because the truth, when couched in authenticity, can be a jarring thing to hear. We could just say, "I believe in what that guy says," we could just claim to be a part of one sect or sub-movement in Christianity, but I think we will be losing something. In the movie, *Taxi Driver* there is a telling scene when Travis, the protagonist, is giving a political candidate who he admires a ride and Travis shares his true feelings about the “filth of the city.” His is not just a tough-on-crime stance, but also a ruthless-on-crime stance. He is not a Republican; he is a fringe fanatic with his own views. He proclaims to the candidate what he really thinks, and it is honest, it isn’t pretty and it is shocking. At that point we are given a picture of the dark cavern of this lone man’s mind – his truthful proclamation was honest, powerful, and shared a deep picture of Travis.

While we may not be sharing a dark and violent nature, the truth of who we are can be difficult and shocking for the world to hear. But that is what it means to stand up and really proclaim who we are. Listen to what Paul is saying, and notice how he does it. Paul starts by taking his audience in, he calms them, he soothes them, and gives them the idea that Paul is in agreement with all those gathered; Paul is on everyone’s side they initially think. But, then Paul takes a rhetorical turn and stays true to the God of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is a God that cannot be sold, Paul claims. This is a God who cannot be captured in a box, who cannot be manipulated, forced or completely known. This is a God who creates, who is the source of all life, and in whose image we are all made. Notice how the crowd is becoming agitated, and nervous. Notice how some are taking offence at Paul's forward nature and presumptive attitude. Then Paul delivers the crux of his faith – the hard truth that many do not want to hear: that Jesus Christ came to offer forgiveness and calls us to repentance. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and that the ministry of Christ is the ministry of the almighty God. We are called to acknowledge our fallen nature, and accept the grace that God offers. Boldness, audacity, and a brazen attitude can only account for such a stand. Yet Paul does not back down, he does not waver, negotiate, or suggest a half-faith, compromising attitude. No, Paul is stating who he is and what he is proclaiming.

Let's stand up there with him. Let's proclaim the Gospel as the church. Karl Barth suggests that the essence of the Church is to proclaim the Word, so let's share the Word of God with the world. Don't back down, don't waver, don't hem or haw but speak the Gospel in the most honest and authentic way. What we will do is proclaim our label as a Christian, no more and no less. We are Christians, we believe that God created all things, that God gives us life that Christ came, offers us forgiveness, and calls us to repentance. This is the foundation of our faith, and it is as much and as little as we have to offer. Are we like the other churches? We are like other churches only as much as they are Christians. Are we conservative or liberal? Neither, we are Christians. Are we glitzy or silent in our worship? Neither, we are connecting with Christ, accepting his forgiveness and offering our repentant selves. What about the contemporary and political issues? We follow God who gives us life, and Christ who offers forgiveness.

We do not parcel out the message in ways it can be digested, sharing the easy part. No, we proclaim all of it, and say it with strength and assurance. This is what we are to proclaim, that we are a people who believe in God, and believe in the forgiveness offered by Jesus Christ. No more and no less. Take the stand, be bold, and proclaim who you are as a follower of Jesus.

Then go and live your proclamation. Say your peace, share the Word, and then go on with your ministry, with your faith, and with your life. Nothing is worse than having someone overstay his or her moment. Remember that *Seinfeld* episode when George left every meeting on a high note? It makes a difference. So don't belabor your proclamation, because we have work to do. We have ministry, which calls us; we have work to do. Isn't that the unspoken part of Paul's message and our message? We claim that we came from God; we claim that God invites us to repentance and forgiveness, but what then? How do we do that? Don't tell the people; show them. Show them what is in the middle of God's divine bookends. Show them how this basic and certain label of Christian shapes and directs your life. After all, that is the work we have to do – living the repentance and living the forgiveness and living the life that God gave us all. So get to work with feeding the poor, get to work by praying for your brothers and sisters, get to work by being a part of a community that offers love, compassion and acceptance as we receive it from God, get to work by standing up for the oppressed, and giving a voice to those who have none. People may not understand what we are doing, who we are, but they will look at us and know something is different.

Think of Don Quixote. He was crazy, and when you saw him with his makeshift breastplate, with a bedpan on his head, and his whimpering servant Sancho at his side, you don't need him to tell you that there is something different. His erratic actions, his chivalrous speech, and the way he lived his life told you that he was different. That is how we are to be as well – especially in this flooded market of competing churches. We are to live as Christians, be a Christian community, and stay true to the powerful simplicity of the cross. I'm not asking you to be an evangelical-Christian, a progressive-Christian, a rational-Christian, or any other kind of hyphenated Christian. I am only asking you to be a Christian, no more and no less. And then to show this in all of your actions, your speech, and the way we are a church. This is scary for Christians on either side of the political spectrum or in any camp because we cannot be counted on for allegiance. We only give allegiance to Christ.

What kind of Church are we? Tell them we are a Christian church trying to follow Christ, and then show them what that means. They saw Paul acting and knew something was different, and Paul continued to live in the example of Christ as he received it. Paul began to step outside the bounds of Judaism to the Gentiles, and made the Gentiles a focus of his ministry through word and deed. Paul showed the world what it meant that God created all and invited all to repentance and forgiveness. We are to do the same, because anything else would be a cognitive dissonance, and hypocrisy. So let's proclaim the Good News, and then get back to the work of caring for each other, praying for each other, serving

each other, and being the church we claim to be.

And remember that everything else is in God's hands. Let go of the results, because we can't make people be Christians. If you read on in this passage, you will find that Paul's eloquent and persuasive speech was not all that successful. A few inquired for more information, and others continued to scorn and mock him. Paul shared the gospel in the best way he could, he was honest, he was to the point, and then he had to let go. Every time I preach a sermon I have to let go and know I can't control how you will hear my own proclamation. When we share, proclaim, and cry the Gospel truth, we can't make people believe. We can't make people come to Jesus, we can only keep the doors open, and continue to do the good work of the church that we are called to do. The Yale theologian, Mirsolv Volf, once wrote about all the deals we make with God. He considered all of the promises made, all of the behavior changes vowed, all of the offerings that God would have received if God did make a deal. But we can't deal with God; all we can do is hope that God will deal with us. Isn't that what Paul is getting at when he talks about God as the almighty creator, the all powerful, the source of all life? God is the source, the cause, and the end of our salvation, and all we can do is invite others, share with others, and let others know that this is a safe place to repent to God all the ways in which you have fallen. This is a safe place to fully experience the forgiveness that God offers. This is a safe place to live out the redemption that God promises through the grace of Jesus Christ. Then it is in God's hands. We will continue to offer the invitation, we will continue to offer the grace, and we will continue to live the Gospel word, which we preach. That is the kind of church we are, a church open to all people, a church comforting all people, and a church leading people to the grace and forgiveness that God offers. We are that church in deed and in action. In this church, your life will be cherished, your life will be challenged, and your life will be saved. That is what our label is to proclaim. Proclaim it, live it and experience it.

AMEN