

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I served as a missionary in Costa Rica, I didn't have a car. So, I walked to and from work, the grocery store, and other places like that. When I took public transportation to places further out, I kept to myself. But there were times that I had to take a taxi, and I almost always ended up talking with the drivers - taxistas, as they're called.

It was obvious that I wasn't a native Costa Rican, but when I gave them the addresses of where I was going - particularly if I was going home, they got curious and asked why I was in the country. After responding that I was a missionary with the Lutheran church, the question came: "What's Lutheran?"

I got really good at giving an elevator speech on Lutheran theology. I said that there are a lot of similarities between Lutheranism and Catholicism. But that baptism and Communion are our only sacraments. That we believe Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a strong example of what it means to say "yes" to God in faith - but that we don't pray to her. And that we believe we are saved by our faith in God's grace, not our own works.

Without fail, every taxista looked at me in the rearview mirror and said, "I'm Lutheran, too, and I didn't know it!"

Those of us who grew up Lutheran, or who've spent a lot of time in this faith tradition, know that there's much more to being Lutheran than the one-minute summary I gave the taxistas. That being Lutheran is the lens through which we interact with the world because it's how we understand our relationship with God.

But the way we share that with others is important.

When we're in a different country, we're used to paying attention to our surroundings in ways that help us pick up on cultural cues. In my situation, it was keeping in mind that the two predominant churches in Costa Rica are the Roman Catholic and Pentecostal churches, and that they heavily influence the culture. Because for as great as the Lutheran church is, it didn't exist as an organization there until 1988.

Here in the US, where we live, picking up on different cues can be a little more complicated. Over the last 30-ish years, we've become conditioned to reacting when things are different than what we expect, instead of being open to saying, "Oh wow, that's different."

And then taking it a step further and asking, “Hey – would you tell me more about that?” And going even further and saying, “Here’s how I understand it.”

Not for the sake of changing minds, but for the sake of learning and understanding. Finding common ground.

And then taking that approach with the gospel – that word literally means “good news” – remembering that how we share about Jesus is as important that we share about Jesus.

The apostle Paul recognized that when he was in Athens. Athens today is the largest and also the capital city of Greece. But even in the first century, it wasn’t exactly a small place.

It was known as a hub for the intellectual and cultural elite life of the Roman Empire. It was filled with philosophers and wannabe philosophers, writers and historians, geographers and composers, artists and architects, physicians and lawyers.

Basically, if you were looking for something ancient, edgy, profound exotic, different, or intellectually stimulating, Athens was the place to be.

It was also a polytheistic city – there were many, many gods. The Greek god, Athena, was primary but there were hundreds of other kinds of gods and devotional practices that were part of life.

It was common for people to appease the gods with an offering, either to gain their favor for the future or to repay a prayer that had been answered. And if a person prayed for help from multiple gods, or to the divine in general, and they considered the prayer answered, sometimes they didn’t know who to give the offering to.

So, an offering could be made to an unknown god as thanksgiving.

Also among these practices were people who had very serious devotion to their religion, including Jewish people of many different backgrounds.

As we are told, Paul was deeply distressed by all of the idols that were in the city. And it provoked daily arguments in both the synagogue and the marketplace because Paul talked about Jesus and the resurrection.

And the responses he got were varied. Some people called him a “pretentious babbler,” but others said, “Hey – we haven’t heard about this before. Come tell us more.”

So Paul did. He went with them to the Areopagus – the place everyone went when they wanted to discover new ways to think, new images to contemplate, and new possibilities for understanding the world.

And instead of starting with the history of Abraham, or the story of Jesus, or something else that might have put the Athenians on the defensive, Paul began with what he had observed and with what they already knew.

He lifted up the altar that was dedicated “to an unknown god” and recognized that the Athenians knew other gods existed even if they didn’t know their names. He quoted poets and philosophers that they were familiar with.

And as he spoke, he connected all of it to the God made visible in Jesus. The God who made all peoples from one ancestor to inhabit the whole earth. The God who is Lord of heaven and earth, who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

In other words, Paul told them that even though they didn’t know who God was before that moment, their origin is in God. It was only after laying this groundwork that Paul began to make a specific Christian claim – that God had appointed the one who will pass judgment in righteousness, and that that one could be trusted because God had raised him from the dead.

Some of the Athenians scoffed at what Paul said. But others joined them and became believers, including Dionysius – who became the first Bishop of Athens.

Today, in the twenty-first century, the diverse context of the US resembles first-century Athens. Multiple cultures and languages and political views and worldviews and religions all exist alongside each other.

Sometimes that existence is smooth, and sometimes it’s kinda bumpy. We’re living in a time of heightened awareness that divides us instead of encouraging us to remember our connectedness. And in those divisions is the desire to elevate one person or group above another, for the sake of keeping others down.

And it’s hard to push back against that.

But what Paul told the Athenians two thousand years ago is still true: God made all peoples from a single ancestor. And because of that, all people are God’s people. In that understanding, no one person or group is superior to another.

¹What Paul presented is a theology, an understanding of God, based in relationship and connection that's rooted in the created world. It broadens our perspective in such a way that it moves us beyond the divisions and hierarchies that we as humans create.

And it invites us to reflect on our human identity, our relationships with one another, and our connections with the rest of the created world – recognizing that it isn't just in the background, but a vital part of the wholeness that God created.

And the way we interact with that wholeness is the way we interact in our relationship with God. The two cannot be separated from each other.

This is true for us as individual people of faith, and collectively as a church, including when we share what we believe about Jesus.

Sharing what we believe about Jesus in an authentic way means paying attention to where you are and who you're with. Recognizing that other people know stuff, too, and approaching it in a way that seeks commonality.

It doesn't mean watering it down, but it also doesn't mean forcing your way in. Because it means not only remembering who Jesus is for us, but also how he lived and interacted with the world.

Sharing a core part of yourself like that is scary because it makes us vulnerable, and we don't know how people will receive it. Not everyone will.

But each time we take that risk and share about Jesus with someone else, we are reminded of the relationship we have with that person, with Jesus, and with the world. It's a connection that too often ends up either in the background or forgotten altogether.

But it's the one that grounds us in God – in whom we live and move and have our being. Not just us as people of faith, but all people and all of creation. It's a connection that holds us together and assures us not only of who we are, but also whose we are.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-1722-31-7>