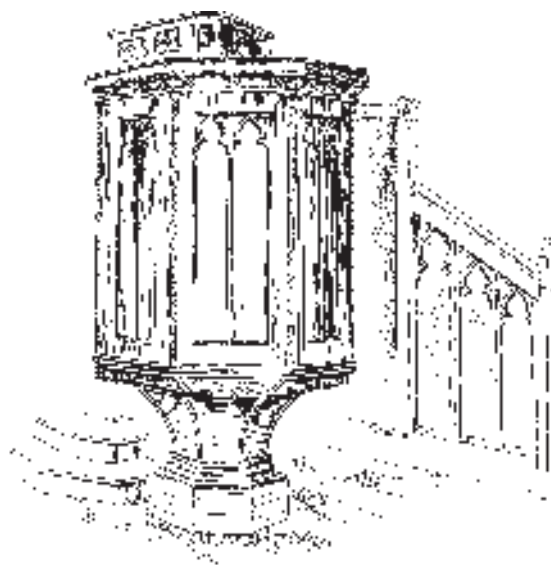


April 26, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Resident Aliens

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Acts 17:16-18:1

You've got to hand it to Paul. He didn't back away from a difficult assignment. He didn't go to obscure places to proclaim the gospel. He didn't shy away from confrontation.

Athens!—the intellectual and philosophical center of our western heritage. Here at the University the learned gathered. Here, too, the mystery cults converged and worshipped their innumerable gods and goddesses.

Athens! You can almost see Paul as he walks the streets of the marketplace, impressed and awestruck by the glamour and glory of this grand city, conscious of the Greek gods and goddesses that peered down on him from the costly shrines and temples. And, he must have asked the question which you and I ask in the midst of our intellectual and commercial achievements: how do you affirm the Christian faith in all of this? How does this faith relate to the fads and fashions that intoxicate the people?

You see, Paul was a "Resident Alien" in a foreign culture. He lived by different values. He had committed himself to the one true triune God, not to the multitude of gods and all the philosophic opinions of the Stoics and Epicureans. He was different. How do you affirm your Christian faith in all of this other worldliness?

According to Luke – Paul does his best to relate, to accommodate his message to the surrounding culture. First, he flatters his audience. Idolaters they may be, but at least they are searching. Their impulse to worship is right, even if the objects of their worship are wrong. Next, Paul appeals to their knowledge of creation. He asserts that his God “made the world and everything in it.” (v. 24) How can people look up at the stars or ponder the mysteries of the world without imagining a real, though still unknown, divine force behind it all? Finally, he cites a well-known poet of their day: “For in him we live and move and have our being...for we too are his offspring.” For good measure he even throws in a line about the resurrection of the dead.

Those may have been great words that Paul uttered, but his argument didn’t work. He may have been suave in accommodating himself to the Athenian culture and adjusting his message to this privileged group, but it didn’t accomplish anything. Athens is the only place where Paul met with very limited success.

Unlike Paul’s letters to the Romans or Corinthians or Thessalonians, there is no letter to the Athenians in the New Testament. When he told the Athenians the claims of Christian faith, they scoffed and mocked, so he left them.

Athens is the only place where Paul’s preaching did not provoke persecution. Those were nice words he uttered, but they were too smooth. Those were splendid arguments he advanced, but they were too innocuous. That was a gracious way to treat the Athenians, but it was inconsequential. It was a faith accommodated to the times—something contrived to please those who were caught up in the cult of happiness and of following the dictates of nature. No hardship here; no struggle; no suffering for a cause or demand for commitment; no cross; no mighty power from without to reach down and lift up the fallen. His words could have come from a public relations person who ran them through a computer to make sure they didn’t offend anyone.

In 1989 Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon wrote a best-selling book titled *Resident Aliens*. It is their contention that an old, inadequately conceived world ended not long ago. In fact, for them the world ended on a Sunday evening in 1963 in Greenville, South Carolina, when in defiance of the State’s time-honored Blue Laws, the Fox Theatre opened on Sunday. Seven of the regular attendees of the Methodist Youth Fellowship at the local Methodist church made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen by the youth leaders, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox.

Their point is that up until then there wasn’t a choice. Up until then places like Greenville were “Christian” places. The culture supported and held up the basic values of the Christian faith. On that night, Greenville, South Carolina—the buckle of the Bible belt—served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes for the church; no more free rides. The Fox Theater went head-to-head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.

You see, our grandparents, certainly our great-grandparents, never worried about whether we would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down. You could not even buy a gallon of gas. And, in most places there was a traffic jam on Sunday mornings at 9:45, when all went to their respective Sunday schools. In taking a child to Sunday school, parents affirmed everything that was good, wholesome, reasonable, and American. Church, home and state formed a national consortium that worked together to instill “Christian values.” People grew up Christian simply by being lucky enough to be born in places like Greenville, South Carolina or Dayton, Ohio.

But, that's not the way our world is anymore. In fact, in our world today there are more Muslims in the United States than Presbyterians. The fact is our world is more like Paul's in Athens than like the America our grandparents knew. We, like Paul, are "Resident Aliens."

Paul had something good and even great to say to the people of Athens, but in trying to accommodate the Christian message to the prevailing culture, he failed to communicate. "After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth," our scriptures tells us. (v 18:1)

Paul must have done some hard thinking as he went down the road from Athens to Corinth. And, praying, too, just as we must surely be caught up short sometimes in the ways we have tailored the disciplines of the Christian faith to our convenience.

At Corinth the message and meaning becomes clear. Compare these two passages—the last half of Acts 17 and the second chapter of 1st Corinthians. Paul said some fine things at Athens, but note how the tone changes at Corinth. No longer are there vague and pleasant words. Now his speech is like a bullet heading for the target. "When I came to you," he said, "I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And, I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." (1st Corinthians 2:1-5)

And, that's where it stands always: to revere and honor the intellect as the gift of God, but to know that true faith is in the power of the Spirit; the acknowledgment of our need and the acceptance of the Savior; the willingness to be disciplined and directed by Christ, and the absolute assurance that "neither life, nor death, nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

These days the church gets a lot of bad press. Did you see the cover of *Newsweek* during Holy Week? *The Decline and Fall of Christian America*. The article points out that the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 points in the past two decades. Fewer and fewer people think of the United States as a Christian nation. Two thirds of the public now say religion is "losing influence" in American society. The proportion of Americans who think religion "can answer all or most of today's problems" is now at a historic low of 48%.

Religion in general and Christianity in particular are losing influence, but the fact is the church as a "resident alien," while not perfect, is doing a lot to offset the negative effects of our culture.

In a world marked by greed and excessive materialism, the church provides a means to reflect on stewardship. In a world that hungers for experiences of intimacy, the church has a unique vision of community which cuts across age, economic, racial and cultural divisions. In an age whose spirit has been numbed by the artificiality of high-voltage entertainment provided by specialists, the church offers the experience of worship which enables ordinary participants to offer praise to a different audience. In an age which exhibits a fear of commitment and a mistrust of community, the church offers the concept of covenant. In a time when people feel crushed by the pressures of time, the church proposes a rhythm which centers on the reality of the Sabbath. But, perhaps most importantly, in a culture that exhibits a great spiritual hunger and mass confusion about the relationship between spirituality and faith, the church offers itself as a window into eternity.

In effect, Paul says to the Corinthians that faith comes, not in our cleverness, but in our commitment. The day comes for each of us when Christ demands us to get off center stage; when it dawns on us that to be a Christian means that requirements are imposed on us: to worship our God, to be attentive to God's word, to seek the mind of Christ, to live a life pleasing to God. For this faith doesn't rest on a principle but on a person—a person who suffered and died for us and who is the very expression of God, who washes out our sins on his cross and who holds us fast when we would fall.

It is not our achieving but his; not what we can achieve on our own, but what we can receive from him and achieve through him. The good news is we can confront our culture and our times, not fashioned by the fads, but contained and controlled by the Christ who died that we might live and who lives that we and the things that matter may never die.

Let us pray,

O God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days. Amen.