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## “Finding Eachother's God”

I grew up a Mennonite among Mennonites. I can only name a few instances of intercultural or interreligious experiences. Growing up in a white & Latino town, Peru, United Methodist seminary, some international travel, a few service trips. I've been exposed to diversity, but not to the extent of Paul. Paul grew up a bilingual Jewish man in Tarsus, a Greek city. He learned both the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophy. He was qualified to spread the news of a Jewish Messiah to the Greek-roman world. Paul entered a diverse world, building little communities along the way. I wonder what it must have been like for the Athenians to invite Paul to speak at the acropolis mount. To stand before all those learned people and say, I have a new God to tell you about.

As I listened to this passage in your hearing. I was struck by how I could not envision many of you proudly proclaiming Jesus is the only way. The most genuine way that we have found, yes. But if I had to guess, I think more of you would attend an interfaith gathering trying to find common ground than evangelizing at Temple Beth'El in Fresno.

Speaking of Temple Beth'El, I was there for the last Interfaith Scholar Weekend focused on the growing threat of Christian nationalism. The belief that America should be ruled by and cater to white Christians. I looked out at the rest of the people gathered there, indigenous, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, men, women, gay, straight, white, and colored. And realized there was no room for this beautiful diversity of people in a Christian nation. During the keynote speaker's initial speech, he spoke about defeating the white Christian nationalists. But then the local agnostic representative rebutted against him, saying that this language was too combative better to use the language of conversion and hospitality. This is a bit of a mind twister, Christians (and other religions) talking about converting certain kinds of Christians at an interfaith gathering. The implication is Christians are worshiping different visions of God.

Let's dive deep into this text.

Paul meets the Athenians where they are at. He begins with an inscription on an altar, “to an unknown god.” Now, I feel like I need to put Paul on blast. There are no accounts of that particular inscription; instead, it would have been more likely the alter said, “to unknown gods” or “to unnamed gods.” Nevertheless, Paul begins with common ground. Naming their shared interest in spiritual matters to a God (or gods) that made the world and all the people on earth and called all people children of God. I'm sure that the philosophers would be nodding their heads at this. They may have also recognized that

the gods need anything. Paul is speaking in the language of the philosophers, using terms they understood. There is no condemnation here but an invitation into a new way.

After Paul has established common ground, he has a couple of differences to point out between the way of Jesus and Athenian polytheism. First, is Paul disapproves of idols. Second is a call to repentance, which means to turn around and chose a different way of living in the world. He is calling on people in the crowd to convert. Its an unusual mixture. Paul respects these people, calls them extremely spiritual in every way, fellow children of God, and searching for God. This is not any kind of evangelism that I've seen.

So what does this mean for us today? Honestly, I feel challenged to follow at least a little in Paul's footsteps. To meet people where they are at. To figure out what they value and what gods they worship. To search out the common ground while also pointing out differences. And most of all, we are all children of God, containers of the breath of God, intrinsically worthy of love and hospitality. So, as I stay faithful to my God, I will defend people's right to search for God on their own terms.