



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 6 (A)

[RCL] Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:7-18, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

Unity is Not Partisan

The Acts of the Apostles, or the Book of Acts, follows the work of the early Christian community in the years immediately following Christ's death and resurrection. Thus readings from Acts are particularly appropriate in the weeks following Easter Day.

In today's reading, Saul, now known as Paul since becoming an avid convert to the message of Christ, has been sent by the Holy Spirit to preach, teach, convert, and baptize both Jews and Greeks throughout Asia Minor. He has arrived in Athens, where he has spoken to the Jews in the synagogue and with philosophers in the marketplace. The Athenian audience is receptive to hearing his message. The writer of the Book of Acts tells us, in the verse preceding today's passage: "Now all the Athenians and foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new."

Paul addresses the Areopagus, a local administrative council, in a brief, respectful, and eloquent speech. While he is concerned about the number of idols in the city, he focuses his attention on one in particular: an altar inscribed "to an unknown god." He announces that the God who made the world is in fact known and is the giver of life and breath and all things, who needs nothing, certainly not silver or gold or idols. Yet he commends the seekers in their search, acknowledging those who "search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him."

Paul ends his speech with a universal call to repentance—a message that applies to each and every one of us, everywhere, in the first century and in the present—and with the assertion that in the resurrection is the proof that Jesus is the one appointed as righteous judge over all.

It is worth following up today's passage with the final verses of that same chapter: "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers."

The tone of this passage, respectful, listening—by both Paul and his Athenian audience—is a hopeful example for us in the midst of division and violence. Seekers are everywhere. May they find, and be found by, God.

In his letter to Christians in first-century Asia Minor, Peter takes a similar tone of respectful engagement. He acknowledges the existing tensions between the established Greco-Roman culture and the Christian converts. Christianity is a new, foreign religion; there is suspicion and fear that these converts will upset the established social order. Peter exhorts his readers: Do not be intimidated by opposition; always be ready to defend your hope in Christ; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear; do not retaliate against those who misunderstand and malign you, while always staying true to your core Christian values.

Similar words of affirmation show up in today's passage from the Gospel according to John. Jesus offers his followers words on how to live a Christian life: If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Words of assurance and hope: God will send you an Advocate, a Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who will be with you forever. Words of Unity: I am in you and you are in me and we are in God. All words that inspire trust and confident faith.

Confidence in God's grace offers us strength in the face of opposition. Perhaps it is this confidence in God's grace that supports gentleness and respectful engagement rather than an angry response.

Certainly there is a place for anger in the face of injustice. There is a place for confrontation. Without a doubt, Paul was open to hearing and encouraging debate between believers on opposite sides of an issue. And Peter offers helpful advice for believers living in a hostile environment: "Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil."

The message across both teachers offers a perspective on respectful dissent: Choose to speak to those who will listen, and live a good and truthful and faithful life, as an example to those who will not.

Can we liken standing firm under verbal—and sometimes physical—attack in our own time and place to the situation of those early Christians whom Peter was addressing, those who were viewed with suspicion and persecuted for their belief? Looking to their example, maybe we can see how holding a confident faith, trusting the Holy Spirit, following the message of Jesus (to the best of our ability) are keys to letting go of our normal human responses of anger and aggression, which lead to us lashing out at our detractors or attacking their beliefs.

In January 2025, following the inauguration of President Donald Trump, Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde preached at the National Day of Prayer Service at the Washington National Cathedral. She asked the president to show mercy to immigrants, refugees, and LBGTQ+ persons. The White House was offended and pushed back harshly, demanding an apology. She stood firm. Her tone was serious and genuine. Yet it was also gentle. Her message was rooted in the gospel, in her strong faith in the message of Jesus.

"Unity is not partisan," Bishop Budde proclaimed in her sermon. "Rather, unity is a way of being with one another that encompasses and respects differences, that teaches us to hold multiple perspectives and life experiences as valid and worthy of respect; that enables us, in our communities and in the halls of power, to genuinely care for one another even when we disagree."

Jesus calls us to love our neighbors and our enemies, those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. He offers a vision of unity that acknowledges the humanity of all people. It's easy enough to love people who agree with us, but Jesus calls us to something more.

Pope Francis ended his 2018 message for World Communications Day with a prayer for respectful communication.

Let us pray together in his words:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace, and help me to bring respect into my conversations.

Give me the grace to listen with an open heart before I speak, and the wisdom to pause when my heart is stirred.

Lord, remove the venom from my judgements and help me to speak about others as my brothers and sisters, even when I disagree with them.

Grant me the humility to recognize your image in those with whom I speak.

Where there is shouting, let me bring listening; where there is confusion, let me bring clarity and charity; where there is hostility, let me bring respect.

I offer my words to you, that they may be used for healing and unity, rather than division.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

***Susan Butterworth** is a church musician and ministerial associate at St. Michael's Church, Marblehead, MA. She is a writer, singer, and equestrian. She has taught English at Salem State University, and is retired from the Episcopal chaplaincy at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), where she led Taizé prayer for many years.*



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