

Christ Has Called EDCC—To Be and To Reach Urban Pioneers

Acts 17:16-34

January 23, 2011

Since the New Year we've been exploring what it means to be called by Christ for our unique mission in life. Nathan started us out by challenging us as individuals to consider Christ's call for each one of us personally as we entered the new year, and I've been inviting us as a congregation to consider what our communal call is. So far, we've agreed that Christ has called EDCC and continues to call us—and last week we looked at what it meant to be called to be and to offer spiritual oasis in a spiritual arid time and place.

This week we're going we're going to consider how Christ has called EDCC to be and to reach Urban Pioneers. What does that phrase mean? Well, our text this morning introduces us to a man who is probably the best example of an urban pioneer—the Apostle Paul. Will you join me as we learn from our teacher of the faith through scripture today:

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I suppose another title for today's sermon could have been "The Apostle Paul goes to the Big City," because our text today gives us a glimpse of what could have been Paul's first visit to one of the wonders of the ancient world—the city of Athens, Greece.

Those of us who have been tourists ourselves in that beautiful city know what Paul probably experienced as he walked the streets of that architectural wonderland. It was most likely even more awe-inspiring for Paul than for contemporary tourists, because he was there just 300 years after Alexander the Great had ruled the world with Athens as one of his centers of power. When Paul was a tourist of the Big City, most of the buildings would have still been intact, not yet damaged from the ravages of time and the wars of human kind.

Still, let me be clear about this--though Paul was probably duly humbled by the amazing achievements of humankind's architectural vision, he was no country bumpkin from the sticks. He was a sophisticate, at home even with the educated elite of Athens. After all, Paul had been born in the city of Tarsus, which, along with Athens and Alexandria, Egypt, was one of the centers of

intellectual learning and art at the time in world history. He had grown up in an atmosphere which prized education, and had been tutored by Gamaliel, a highly respected educator and Greco/Jewish philosopher.

So when Paul went to Athens, he could—and he did—hold his own with the intellects of the city.

Our scripture this morning tells us that he first shared his gospel message at the place he knew best—the local synagogue. But then the apostle branched out—joining other street philosophers in the agora—the market place where you could not only buy your produce and goat meat for the evening meal, but also join in and debate the latest political or philosophical thought.

Paul's testimonial about Jesus Christ caught the attention of influential Greek thinkers—especially, we're told, the Epicureans and the Stoic philosophers.

When we hear the word Epicurean, we usually think of food. However, time has twisted the original intent of the philosophy of Epicureans, whose followers Paul met in the agora that day. Epicureans wanted to free humanity from fearing the power and random control of the gods and also the fear of death. He taught that life should be enjoyed in the present, a modified version of Ecclesiastes "eat, drink and be merry" philosophy. Essentially, Epicureanism taught their followers that to enjoy in moderation all things sensory was the way to find happiness in life.

On the complete opposite end of the philosophical continuum were the Stoics, who shunned the senses and tried to remove themselves from all passions.

Representatives of both those groups heard Paul's teachings about Jesus in the agora, and the Christ message was so unusual that they invited him to make his case before the Areopagus.

The Areopagus is literally translated "The Hill of Ares" in Greek—or Mars Hill in Latin. Those of you who remember your Greek and Roman mythology know that the god Ares/Mars was the God of War.

For many centuries the Areopagus was located on a rock slab just below the acropolis, and it was here that before the 5th century, homicide cases were tried.

By the time of Paul, however, the Areopagus was two things. First, the Areopagus was an actual place where new philosophical and theological ideas were presented to be judged as sound and worth sharing with everyone, or deemed crazy and its proponent told to cease and desist. Second, the Areopagus was also the name of the council who made those decisions, acting as judge and jury.

Our text tells us that Paul was taken that day to the Areopagus to make his case before the council. There Paul—always a proponent of being all things to all people—was able share with the people of Urban Athens—a relevant Gospel Word in Jesus Christ.

“Gentlemen of Athens,” he respectfully begins, followed by a compliment to their culture. “I perceive you are very religious.” He acknowledges their statues that represent all of the gods of the many world religions that were studied and followed in Athens at the time.

Then he pointed out one statue that was inscribed, “To an unknown God.” “Let me tell you who that God is so he will be unknown no longer,” Paul says. And he begins to share the gospel message of the God made known through Jesus Christ.

Though he was respectful to the different religious bodies gathered around to hear him, he didn’t hold back on the important beliefs that the God who came to earth in Jesus was the God of all nations.

When he got to the part about the promise of resurrection through Christ, he lost some people; others wanted to hear more; still others were intrigued and converted.

And though it took a little longer in Athens than in other cities which Paul visited on his missionary journeys, eventually, a church was born, and the body of Christ grew even bigger.

Paul, an urban pioneer of the faith himself, reached out to the urbanites of Athens and introduced them to a way of thinking that gave them new hope for a fresh way of thinking.

I heard a pastor once preach on this text pose this question:

*What would happen if a modern-day Paul landed at D/FW and took one of our major freeways into the heart of our fair city?

*What would Paul see which would help him understand the needs of our city?

*What would he see that would help him understand the things to which we are committed as a community?

*Would he see the tall buildings, the major industrial and business developments?

*Would he see the beautiful art's district with some of the most incredible architectural wonders, like the new world renown Winspear opera house?

*Would he learn more about the Dallas Cowboys, Mavericks or the Texas Rangers than he ever wanted to know? All of these represent something we as a community value and some even adore. The pastor wondered if Paul would take on the educated elite of Dallas, challenging us as he did the academics of Athens centuries before.

What would Paul say to us?

What would Paul want us to say to each other?

You see, Paul knew there was a unique ministry for those who live and work in urban locales. He knew as he looked around Athens that not only did it contain the wealthy, educated elite, but also the many poor who served them and labored to build the beautiful buildings that surrounded them. He knew, like in every city, that not all was beautiful—that buildings, and sports venues, and academic arguments cannot hide human need and despair.

He knew because he himself was an urban pioneer. What, exactly, does that phrase mean?

*An urban pioneer is someone who doesn't abandon large urban communities to the wasteland of crime, poverty, and despair.

*It is someone who takes up the challenge to move toward the frontier of learning new cultures.

*An urban pioneer has to be fleet of mind and creative to meet the needs of a changing community, seeing potential in places that look dilapidated.

*Christian urban pioneers claim the city as Christ's realm, and they don't abandon it the darker elements that destroy life.

Paul knew, as he preached, that the native Athenians were distracted and blinded to the true needs of their community by the idols they worshipped and the senseless arguments they engaged in. So, too, might Paul see the challenge for us in our time and place to be the distractions of those gods we serve that vie for our attention, rather than living clearly in the promise of what God offers.

It's not easy being an Urban Pioneer of the faith, even for those of us who live in the Bible belt, where there still seems to be a church on every corner. Even here we feel the challenge especially in the urban centers of our cities—like where those of us who have made our faith home at EDCC find ourselves perched on the edge of our fair city. Those of you who have been coming to East Dallas Christian Church for long years have been witness to the demise of some of the great churches of an earlier time—Gaston Avenue Baptist Church, St. John's Presbyterian Church, and most recently Munger Place United Methodist Church—which has come back in a grand way thanks to Highland Park Methodist.

Many congregations have abandoned the urban center—finding it too difficult to continue ministry because of cultural and racial changes, or because the younger generation just doesn't speak church-ese, and they just don't understand the need for church the way their grandparents once did.

East Dallas Christian Church considered the opportunity to leave the urban center at one point in our history. There was much debate, and a vote taken—with a slim majority of folks opting to stay and minister in this place.

Those who voted to stay felt the call to be urban pioneers, to reach out to others who are also pioneers in this new urban setting.

It hasn't been easy. A recent demographic study that was done of the area around our church home shows why ministry is an exciting challenge for us here. In this time and place, EDCC has been called to be urban pioneers in a setting that has two very distinct and diverse communities—but both living side by side in our neighborhood.

The first group is labeled Latino Nuevo by the church demographer, Tom Bandy. In the Latino Nuevo “more than three-quarters of adults are under the age of 45. These households are filled with child-rearing families—no cluster contains more large families—and they tend to live in old apartments and homes valued at half the national average. With half of the residents never completing high school, the vast majority of adults work as laborers or service workers. Although their incomes are one of the lowest in the country—household income is 40 percent below the U.S. average—many residents may have come from countries where economic conditions are worse. For them, Latino Nuevo holds the promise of opportunity.

The second group, equal in population numbers and growing in our neighborhood are those that Bandy identifies as Young Cosmopolitans, who are described as “young (under 35), mostly single, college educated and earning upper-middle class incomes as white-collar professionals, managers and executives living in luxury apartments and condos in fast growing cities. Many hold fast-track jobs in finance, information services and the arts. If they're married, it's a given that both spouses are working and their dual incomes provide comfortable, upper-middle-class lifestyles.”

Our Church Extension evaluators recognize our challenge when they shared with us that “no single ministry approach that will effectively impact both Latino Nuevos and Young Cosmopolitans at the same time, even though both groups may include Spanish or bi-lingual speakers. The life-ways, values, education level, and socio-economic expectations of the two groups are simply too different from each other. This reality indicates a strategic need for consideration either of ministry opportunities targeted at one or the other of the groups or separate ministries designed to meet the needs of both target groups but which run parallel to each other. As well, remodeling or repurposing of facility space will depend entirely on the population segment(s) the congregation feels it is called directly to serve.”

This assessment is probably not a surprise to any of us, and it does affirm our challenge as a congregation.

Yet, those of us who have stayed at East Dallas Christian Church feel the call in our being to be Urban pioneers, and to reach out in ministry to the urban pioneers who are our neighbors whether they be Nuevo Latinos or Young Cosmopolitans or just regular Joes and Janes, Juans and Juanitas. We are called to pioneer a new frontier in Dallas—right at our doorsteps.

That means we must consider what ministry is most effective to our next-door neighbors in the diverse context in which we find ourselves. The Good News is needed, irrespective of our differences. How can we best be God's ambassadors in this time and in this place?

Paul did it in one of the toughest mission fields of his time—Athens, Greece. It took time and effort on his part, and on the part of those who followed him years later.

What we learn from him this morning is that

- *an urban pioneer respects the intellect of those whom we meet;
- *an urban pioneer learns to listen, and to meet those who are in our mission field on their own turf—learning their ways and beliefs;
- *an urban pioneer, however, still shares unabashedly the Good News of Jesus Christ that is a gift to all, regardless of status or station in life.
- *an urban pioneer states unequivocally that there is something new and better for the whole community—the whole city—when we embrace Jesus' call to love our God with all our being, and to love one another as ourselves.

Christ has called EDCC to both be and reach out to Urban Pioneers, those who come to serve and those we reach out and serve.

We continue the mission of Christ in this place—for this time.

Thanks be to God