

"I See You"

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²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

²⁹Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

³²When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." (Acts 17:22-32)

When Paul first came to Athens, things were not going particularly well. He was literally run out of town by a mob in Thessalonica. That same mob followed him to Berea and disturbed his preaching there, too. When his supporters whisked down to Athens, trying to stay ahead of the hecklers, it didn't take him long to get into trouble again. Having seen the pervasiveness of pagan worship in the city, Paul began arguing about the problem with the local Jewish leadership, local philosophers and pretty much anyone on the street who would listen. They quickly dismissed him as a "babbler," a purveyor of strange and foreign divinities. In short, they thought he was a nut -- a nut who wouldn't shut up.

So the gathered crowd, purporting to want to understand Paul's new teaching, decided to take him up to the Areopagus, a small rocky hill in the city near the Acropolis. It was here that a venerable council of nine elders or "archons" held court. These were the chief magistrates of the city-state, the men who not only adjudicated philosophical and political disputes, but also decided criminal matters.¹ I guess the crowd figured that one of two things would happen: either Paul would convince the local power structure that this new teaching was reasonable and defensible, or the magistrates would find some way to get rid of this philosophical pest. Either way, the crowd would win.

With the pressure on, Paul does something remarkable. "Athenians," he begins, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way." He explains to them that he has walked

¹ "From Synagogues and Sanctuaries to Bars and Boardrooms: The Apostle Paul at the Areopagus," <http://www.journeywithjesus.net>. Retrieved May 18, 2017.



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through their city and carefully studied what he has seen. The Greek word Paul uses, *anatheōrēō* (ἀναθεωρέω), means much more than just to see or even notice. It signifies an intensified looking, an especially attentive and thorough studying to grasp the full meaning of something.² Paul establishes his credibility by affirming that he has paid close attention to the Athenians, their ways and patterns. “I see how you are,” he says. “**I see you.**”

Many of you might remember these same words from James Cameron’s 2009 movie *Avatar*. The native peoples of Pandora, the Na’vi, would greet each other with a formality of mutual honor and respect. This exchanged greeting, “I see you,” elevated a normal social interaction to a higher plane. When Terry Tillman, a human resources consultant from California, first saw *Avatar*, he immediately recognized this greeting from something he had actually seen in the world of human interaction. While on safari in Africa about 25 years ago, Tillman had noticed a peculiar, recurring pattern that the indigenous people would follow. Whenever they would come into contact with one another, they would pause, stand before the other person, and look directly into his or her eyes. They would hold the gaze for 5 seconds, perhaps even 15 seconds. Then one would quietly utter some words to the other person, who would quietly reply, before each went his own way. Tillman finally asked one of his Samburu guides what they were doing. “One of them says, ‘**I see you,**’” the guide replied, “and the other gives the response, ‘**I am here.**’”

Tillman instantly saw the power in such a greeting. It holds each person in the reality of that moment, while each is required to acknowledge the presence and essential humanity of the other person. “The eyes are the windows to the soul,” Tillman wrote. “When we connect with the soul, who we truly are, all things positive are present—joy, acceptance, compassion, understanding, cooperation, loving, peace of mind, humor, ease, simplicity and more. That is the nature of the soul. And isn’t this what we truly want...?”³

This is exactly what Paul did with the Athenians. When he first preached in Athens, it did not go well. All the Athenians were hearing was babble. *Blah, blah, blah, Jesus... blah, blah, blah, grace.* But when Paul really stopped to look, to really perceive them and their situation, he saw something new, something relevant, something that enabled him to say with authenticity, “Athens, I see you.”

What he saw was something they had in common, something everyone has in common. “As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship,” Paul said, “I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’” The Athenians, despite all the gods they had created, clearly felt like they had missed something. As they searched for those things that are divine and permanent, for the true essence of the good, they sensed that they didn’t quite have it. They couldn’t say exactly what they were missing or how they were missing it. All they could do was build a little altar -- a minor stack of stones and mortar – to acknowledge the missing connection.

This past Wednesday I did a little exercise that author Thomas Edward Frank calls the “space walk.” Frank wrote a little book called *The Soul of the Congregation* that has made a lasting impression on me. He developed the space walk with his colleagues at the Candler School of Theology as a way for people of faith to uncover the true stories that fuel our faith. It is exactly what it sounds like: you just walk... through a church building, across the grounds, through the neighborhood... and you pay close attention to what you see, what

² Strong's Greek Concordance #333, <http://biblehub.com>.

³ “I see you” -- <http://www.finer minds.com/consciousness-awareness/samburu-greeting-terry-tillman/>

you hear, what you smell. You pay attention to the people you encounter. In short, you do what Paul did in Athens. And you are almost always surprised by how the simplest thing can impact you – can capture your memory or your imagination – if you just take the time to see it... to really see it for what it is.

That day I saw the crossing guard who stands every day across the street, there to make sure children from Coltrane Webb Elementary make it home safely. He told me about the time one of the other guards was hit and killed in that duty, how people often honk, yell or disrespect him on the street. He said there are only three this year – only three kids who walk home that way. And yet he is there every school day. I admit that I had never really given it much thought. But today, faithful crossing guard, I see you.

At least three times on my walk, driver's education vehicles passed with young students at the wheel and an instructor in the front passenger seat. Brave, brave teacher, I see you. Young people both excited and nervous about a major rite of passage, I see you.

Down the street, I paused to listen to a group of eleven people gathered outside of the library. Many had their belongings in backpacks and grocery bags. I expected many of them would be heading back to the Salvation Army shelter in a few hours. I listened to them laughing, and I realized that they had formed a closely knit community there among the statues, as the rest of the world drove by. People of the library steps, I see you.

Circling the block I stopped in to see Lynn Neal's new space, the old motorcycle garage that is becoming her new showroom. She was vacuuming up dust and getting ready to meet a friend with paint swatches and siding samples. In addition to taking risks on a new business venture, contributing to our economy and improving our neighborhood, she is imagining how she might offer some of her new space to help those in need. Lynn Neal, entrepreneur and disciple, I see you.

As I walked out Lynn's door, a siren began to wail from the station across the street. The truck pulled out to answer a call. My imagination runs about the emergency that might be on the other end of that call. Firefighters of Concord Fire Station One, I see you.

At the meeting of the Presbytery of Charlotte this past week, there was a lot of talk about the absence of young people in the church. One retiring pastor, who has also served as a geology professor at UNCC, estimated that, out of all of his students in all of his classes, less than 5% were involved in church at all. He senses that his students, on the whole, know very little about Jesus -- that they have no real sense that God has anything to offer them. He worries, as I do, that all they are hearing from the church is babble. And that is probably true because we have not really been encountering them. As a church, we have not stopped long enough to stand with them in the moment, look into their eyes, and say "I see how you are. I see you."

Like it or not, the church today is back in Athens. We are surrounded by other voices, other messages, other idols and other gods in our culture, and we no longer have pride of place or priority in that conversation. But even if the people around us do not know much about Jesus, or faith, or grace, they do know that they are missing something. They still crave connection with the Divine, something eternal that they cannot define but that they sense is real, and they are out there building altars to that unknown God. Paul knew then, as we know now, that the church of Jesus Christ has a powerful word to speak about that God whom we do know. But if we want to speak such a Word in ways that help and heal, we have to start with a simple act, and a simple affirmation:

"People of God, I see you." **Amen.**