

"Back from the Future"
Acts 17:19-34
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When I was young, I gained an interest in archeology. My family went on a camping trip to Mesa Verde in southwestern Colorado. The fascinating part to a young boy was the cliff dwellings. They were amazing, but very empty. One had to imagine how the people who lived there made a living in that barren, rocky area. They lived in the cliff dwellings, and at night pulled up their ladders and guarded their secret pathways for communal security. During the days, they descended to the bottoms of the arroyos where they had planted their corn, beans, and squash. We know something of their lives because of the excavations and digs that took place around the cliff dwellings. Remains of the civilization were found in garbage dumps, under the floors of the dwellings, and scattered around on the landscapes. Archeologists found broken tools, pots both broken and whole, evidence of weapons, as well as kivas for worship. With these finds they could begin to piece together something of the social, cultural, and religious makeup of these people. To me it was fascinating.

There is a parallel field to archeology known as "cultural anthropology." The cultural anthropologist goes into a community and through observation and interviews seeks to come to an understanding of the people and their values. Essentially, that is what Paul did as he wandered around Athens. He observed that the Athenians enjoyed philosophical debate, that they were fairly well to do, and that there were many temples and images that had religious significance. He even found an altar to an "Unknown God." Thus, with this foundation he began his sermon to the people, based on what he hoped would be common ground that could lead to a fuller understanding of what life was really all about. He complemented them on their religiosity. Quoted their poets, and then proceeded to tell them that he wanted to talk about something for which they were looking, but had not yet found. It was the one and only God that they did not yet know, but whom Paul did. It was the God they should have known to some degree through creation. Most importantly, however, it was the God who sent his son, Jesus, to bridge the gap between humankind and himself, and it was this son who had been crucified and raised from the dead. This raised one would judge humanity in the end.

Many Greeks believed that the spiritual realm was superior to the material world, and that the two were totally incompatible. The thought of the dead being raised was a ridiculous idea, because it would unite the human spirit with matter. They laughed Paul off. Others heard him out and joined the church, although apparently not many. It seems that in that area of the world there were many more and better prospects for conversion than the sophisticated and self-assured Athenians. Just across the peninsula, 65 miles to the southwest, was the city of Corinth. There Paul had found a receptive audience for his message, and he never again returned to Athens, nor does it seem he ever wrote them a pastoral letter.

Now to us today. Suppose that 500 years from now a people from a faraway place in a faraway galaxy developed the ability to travel through time, and they were able to find their way to the United States in the year 2017. Suppose they were able to do a cultural anthropological study of us. What would they find?

They would find many indications of affluence. Many buildings, stores for almost anything, schools, well stocked grocery stores, and many single-family homes. They would also find churches. In many communities, these would be some of the most prominent and visible edifices. If our visitors watched very long, it would become apparent that most of these buildings are used primarily one day a week, with smaller groups coming for various activities on other days. Just from observation could they say we are a religious people? It in part depends on where they looked in the country, if the criterion were primarily numbers. The state with the highest church attendance is Utah, where if you add those who attend weekly to those who attend at least monthly, 64 percent of the population attends church. 35 percent do not go at all. If one drops in on Vermont, weekly and monthly attendance is 28 percent with 71 percent never attending. Wisconsin is about in the middle with a combined total of 53 percent attending with 45 percent never attending. Do attendance figures, however, make faith a dominant part of our lives? I don't think so. I believe the real test is the condition of the people around us.

I was overseas with the army when the Watts riots occurred in Los Angeles from August 11 through 16 in 1965. They boiled over because of a report of police brutality in the community. On the one hand, I couldn't believe what I was seeing, but on the other, I wasn't all that surprised. In large measure the rage in Watts was a reaction to the disparity in the distribution in wealth among people. The fissures between rich and poor were and are very deep in this country, and they are further exacerbated by divisions along racial lines. My fear is that those divisions are only going to get deeper in the years ahead. I can do little about it outside my own little realm here in Marshfield, but here I can find some things that I might be able to affect. The Johannine text today tells us that if we love Jesus, we are to keep his commands. It seems to me that the dominant command is to love my neighbors as Jesus loved me. I don't deserve that love, but he gave it to me anyway. I have done nothing to earn it, nor will I ever do so. But having experienced his love, I and we are called to find our own individual ways of sharing that love with others. Part of that love is to go to the poor and dispossessed and to bridge the gap between rich and poor.

Since Wisconsin is now my adopted state, I did a little research to see what might be out there that we could influence through love and commitment to Jesus and our neighbors. Wood county is 27th in the state when median household incomes are considered. Thus, we aren't in too bad a shape, although 11 percent of our population lives below the poverty level. Given that, we are still in the upper half of Wisconsin counties. Our neighbor to the west, Clark county, is 70th out of the 72 Wisconsin counties. 14.9 percent of their people live below the poverty line. In the whole state of Wisconsin, 21 percent of the children under five live in poverty. Seven percent of the children under 18 live in extreme poverty with incomes less than

50 percent of the federal poverty level. All is not well in Wisconsin despite its presence in the richest country on the face of the earth. What does Jesus call us to do, so that others may recognize us as “deeply religious” people?

As I look at myself, I wonder if that visitor from the future would see my faith working itself out in concrete ways in my near community. I, like all of us I suspect, contribute to various helping agencies, but is that enough? The older I get, the less I feel comfortable with that. Of course, that feeling comes at a time when my body is telling me “you can’t do everything you used to do!” How ironic!

Flo Beth learned about a local program called “Nutrition on Weekends” or NOW which provides food for children to take home over the weekend. She found out about it through Faith Lutheran Church, so I suspect that many of you may already know about it, too. If not, it is one of the most meaningful ways that many of us may be able to make a real, Christ centered difference among the people of our community. It is something that would make our commitment to Jesus visible to those back from the future.

The program targets childhood hunger. It is a response to data collected in 2012 from Marshfield students who indicated that 20 percent of them had gone to bed hungry at least once in the preceding month, because there was not enough food in the home. By 2015 that percentage had risen to 23 percent. A pilot program to provide weekend food for these children was started in 2013 with 29 students. It has since expanded to serve 250-300 students in the Marshfield, Auburndale, Granton, and Spencer school districts.

The parents who participate in the program reported the following:

32 percent said, “I **sometimes** don’t have enough food to feed my child or children on the weekend.

47 percent said, “I **usually** don’t have enough food to feed my child or children on the weekend.

21 percent said, “I **never** have enough food to feed my child or children on the weekend.

0 percent said, “I **always** have enough food to feed my child or children on the weekend; or I **usually** have enough food to feed my child or children on the weekend.

Can you imagine being a parent who was unable to feed your children for any length of time? What would the anguish be? I would feel like an utter failure. I’m sure the parents would gladly give and have given the last bit of food to their children, rather than letting them go hungry. There is so much pain and suffering in this world! Where would Jesus be in all this. As I looked at this material about hungry children, I can understand more fully why turning stones into bread was a real temptation for Jesus. It was anything but a theoretical temptation

for one who loved so profoundly as did he, and Jesus could have banished hunger from the earth by the power that he had as the Son of God. But he chose not to do so. Why? Because he left that to us.

The reason there is hunger in the world is because the human family has not assumed its responsibilities to be the hands and feet of Jesus, or of whatever being they understand to be God. Every religion expects its adherents to be the means by which God assists human beings. He expects us to put our love and faith into action. Sunday morning is only the filling station that gives us the spiritual energy to go out and be Christ in the world.

There is no one way to be Christians. Each of us needs to find his or her own way. For me and Flo Beth the Nutrition on Weekends may be a way for us to serve in Marshfield. I mention it here, because my understanding is that they need volunteers to help pack the weekend meals, as well as needing people to donate various food items. If you are interested in an opportunity for Christian service, you can contact the Marshfield Area United Way for more information.

I hope you do not hear this sermon as a commercial for Nutrition on Weekends, for it is not. What it is, is a plea for all of us to be more visibly Christian in the ways we live out our lives. I'm afraid that folks back from the future would see most of us living pretty secular lives. It is hard to distinguish those of us who are Christians from the broader society. Did Jesus intend it to be this way? I don't really think so. Thus, I need to do better. We all can do better, so that someone observing us would say with amazement and joy, "Look how they love one another, especially those who are in need."

Amen