

10 Years [Deeper Sheet 2.8.09]

How have we become who we are? What is our story? What stories are characteristic of who we are and why we are who we are? One story comes from the Areopagus in Athens. In Paul's day, Athens was a place where people exchanged the latest ideas about the world. It was also a city chock full of idols. This violated everything that Paul, as a Jew, had ever been taught. Idols were strictly forbidden. There aren't endless gods. In the Jewish mind, God is one. There is one God, creator of heaven and earth. What's a Jew to do in such a place? Acts 17 tells us that Paul was "provoked".

You might imagine Paul going berserk and knocking down idols, condemning the Greeks for their idolatry in the same way Jesus turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. Or you might imagine Paul deciding to turn back and walk around the city to his next destination—better to avoid the mess than run the risk of getting corrupted by it. But what makes this a defining story is that something unexpected happens. Paul responds in a way that is contrary to what all the details of his background suggest. He doesn't condemn. He invites. He doesn't escape. He engages. Instead of categorizing and pigeonholing, Paul chooses to see people who aren't that different from him, or from you or me. He looks into their culture and speaks affirming words about their longing to be connected to the divine. He quotes their poets. He says, "God is actually not far from each one of us".

He then goes on to explain the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and foretells a day when God would put the world to rights. Paul focuses his attention on the idea of justice. He says that a day is coming when God will say "Enough." A day is coming when God will redeem all things and there will be no more war. There will be healing. Again, the Jewish mind anticipated such a day, but what no one anticipated was that the day had already come: in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In his resurrection, the future had somehow rushed into the present. God's new creation has begun, Paul explains, and God is looking for people to partner with in the redemption of all things.

What does it look like when the future rushes into the present? It's like a life that used to be defined by shame and guilt and is now defined by glory because God can make shameful things into something beautiful. It looks like a newly dug well in Burundi bringing water where there hadn't been any. It looks like the hug of a friend as you try to make it through. When God's future rushes into the present, people who are barely hanging on find something worth hanging on for, and they find that they aren't hanging on alone. Our journey hasn't been without its broken moments, but as Parker Palmer says, "Wholeness doesn't mean perfection". Death is instead the seedbed for new life, and we're invited to practice resurrection in anticipation of the day when God puts it all back together.

One of the elements of any enduring story is unexpected action. This is especially true of the grace of Christ. It's also true of Paul's response to the Greeks in Athens. As you reflect on your life story, where have you seen God's unexpected action?

Instead of condemning the Greeks and arguing against them, Paul uses language that affirms and invites while also remaining true to his conviction that the death and resurrection of Jesus changes everything. Think about what it's like when you get provoked by someone else. How often does responding in a condemning way lead to a positive outcome?

Think back to your most recent argument [with a spouse, with a friend] when you responded in a condemning way. Now, think through how you might have interacted differently if you had responded in an inviting way rather than a condemning way. How might it be possible for you to affirm and honor another person while still remaining true to your conviction?

In your life right now, where do you desperately need the future to rush into the present?

Often, the way in which we partner with God is deeply connected to our own longings and dreams. What hunches do you have about how you are being invited to partner with God to bring about the redemption of all things?

Paul reminds us about the importance of focusing on who we are rather than who we're not. As people who believe that all men and women are created in God's image and therefore reveal God's glory, we have the gift of being able to speak life-giving words to one another. We get to tell each other the truth of who we are. If you're with a group of people, take a moment and reflect on each person present and how they uniquely reveal God's character in their lives. For some it might be their deep care for doing good work. For others it might be a love of children. It could be anything. Take a few minutes and speak these life-giving words to one another.