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Go to the World  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
June 28, 2020  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 17:22-31

Some years ago, my wife, Marjorie, went away for French language training. She went to a small town in Quebec for a number of weeks of french “immersion”. Just before she left she presented me with some CDs to help me learn Spanish, which was something I wanted to do. It was funny that we were both going to work on our language skills at the same time: Marjorie in immersion, and me in my car when I was driving to work. But when I put the first CD into my car, after about 90 seconds I nearly drove off the road because I was so shocked at what I heard.

Perhaps I need to explain that a bit. The basic idea behind immersion for learning a language is that you separate yourself from your normal life and immerse yourself in a culture where French is the only language that is used. With immersion, you absorb the language in an organic and natural way. But the first step is to separate yourself from your own life. Immersion invites you to forget everything that you know and to start from scratch. In immersion you do not translate words, you just live the language. Immersion is an invitation to wipe the slate clean and start again in a different language.

But with my CDs, after about 90 seconds I already knew around 1,200 words in Spanish. Because the method used on my CDs is not to start from scratch, but rather, to build on what I already knew about English. I was not told to forget everything that I knew about English or to leave my “normal” life behind. I was instead invited to learn Spanish from the perspective of an English speaker. I was invited to transform my knowledge and my thinking, not just chuck it in the bin as is the strategy with immersion.

And if you are wondering how I learned 1200 words so fast, it’s because with only a few exceptions, English words ending in “ion” are the same in Spanish, except that words ending in “tion” become “ción”. “Condition” becomes “condición” for example. The exceptions are: translation (traducción) and explanation (explicación). And now that you know that, you also know 1200 words in Spanish. If you are listening to this in your car, please do not drive off the road.

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I was reminded of that language story this week because of our reading from Acts. In Acts, Paul visits Athens in order to preach the gospel of Jesus. But instead of telling the people that they are wrong and they need to follow Jesus - which is like the immersion approach to teaching a language - Paul instead begins by wandering around town, talking with people, looking at the sights, and he develops an understanding of the history and the perspectives of the people of Athens. It is only after that that Paul starts preaching, and explaining to the people of Athens how Jesus already relates to their own lives. Instead of preaching to the people that everything they know is wrong, and that they should wipe the slate clean and then embrace Paul's new message about Jesus, Paul weaves the gospel story into the existing story of the community. Paul integrates the message of Jesus into the existing pantheon of gods, and into the framework of society.

Many Christian missionaries use the immersion technique to share the good news, inviting people to reject their faith and spirituality of birth and to adopt a new faith. This is exactly what happened with European expansion into Canada, where the Church told indigenous people that their spirituality was just superstitions nonsense, and inviting them to embrace Christianity as the only "real" religion. Conversion by immersion seems to be the default technique when you can back it up with military and economic power.

But Paul - preaching in Athens - is not in a position of power. His method of preaching to the people is to broaden their horizons to include the message of Jesus without any need to reject the people's current beliefs. Paul worked with the people where they were and invited them into a new way of living. And I like to imagine that Paul would have done exactly the same thing even if he had been in a position of power, because it's a great strategy for teaching. For example, It even works in mathematics.

[slide: math shirt]

I used to tutor first year calculus at university. My specialty was helping students who didn't really care about math, but their degree required them to pass a single first-year math class. And I was a great tutor, because I used the same method that Paul used. When students came to me and asked me how to solve a particular math problem, I refused to show them. Instead, I invited them to show me how they solved the problem themselves. While they solved the problem - incorrectly of course - I watched carefully to see what

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they were doing. And after watching them work out their problem, I could see how best to help them. At the risk of causing any painful flash-backs, I will remind us that lots of math problems have 4 or 5 steps. And very very often, these students did all the steps correctly - except for 1 step. And mathematics - for all its beauty - is without mercy, and a single wrong step almost guarantees an incorrect final answer. But instead of wiping the slate clean with these students and showing them “my” way to solve a problem, I instead used what they already knew, and simply helped them with the 1 single step that they were struggling with. These students did not need to start from scratch, although almost all of them begged me to teach them that way. These students just had to transform their thinking a little bit to become better mathematicians. Well, good enough for the 1 course they had to pass anyway.

St. Paul invited the people of Athens to transform their thinking “a little bit”, and to embrace the gospel message as part of their ongoing journey of faith. To include Jesus in their existing pantheon. What do you think about that? Does that sound like a “trick”? Does that sound like a way of fooling the people of Athens? Or does it sound like a sensible and authentic way to help religious expression evolve and mature over time, taking in new ideas while still being faithful to well-loved practices? How fluid is faith anyway? How fluid is your own faith? What are the options anyway?

Over the years, the United Church of Canada has written a number of documents about inter-faith relations.

[slide: twmkeo] In 2004 we released a document called *That We May Know Each Other: United Church - Muslim Relations Today : Toward a United Church of Canada understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Islam in the Canadian context*. And on page 6 of that document they give a description of 4 different approaches that characterize our understanding of other faiths in relation to Christianity. And all of these approaches are affirmed in our scriptures.

[slide: exclusivist]

Exclusivist Approach: Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity. Christianity is the only “real” religion. John 14:6 “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” seems to

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support this position.

[slide: inclusivist]

Inclusivist Approach: Christianity is the only “real” religion, and Jesus Christ is the only path to reconciliation. But a loving God would not condemn people of other faiths if those people are good and merciful. Non-Christians can be considered as “adopted Christians” if they are good people, without their own knowledge of course. John 1:1-5, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. The word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the word, and without the word not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” seems to suggest this position.

[slide: pluralistic]

Pluralistic Approach: There are many paths to God. No single religion has all the answers. Jesus is the way for Christians, but not necessarily the path for all. 1 Cor 13:12, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully.” seems to affirm this position.

[slide: transformationist]

Transformationist Approach: Christianity has always been a living and evolving expression of faith. Christian faith can be transformed by encounters with others that we could not have imagined. Mark 7:25-28, “A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Jesus, and she came and bowed down at Jesus’s feet. Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. Jesus said to her, ‘Let the children of Israel be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’” is one scripture used to support this position.

On this scale, St. Paul was perhaps the original Transformationist. He would probably also have been a good math tutor. In any case, the story in Acts invites us to consider how we share our own message with our community. How do we do that? Well, we can do exactly what St. Paul did. We can spend time in our community, listening to people. Getting a better sense of their lives, their needs, their pains and their joys. I’m

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having a great time these days waiting in lines outside of grocery stores. I am always only 2 m away from 2 people, and I can usually tempt at least 1 of them into conversation. And people very readily share what they care about these days, isolation, family, whatever. The stories are out there, we just need to listen. And I find it works better if you shop when there is a long lineup.

I personally am very excited about our “Let’s Talk About Racism” groups that are starting this week, and I hope that some of the participants are not church people, but people from our wider community. And if we are blessed to have “outsiders” in those groups, I hope that we can all listen deeply to what they have to say. We need to listen to our neighbours before we can expect them to care about us.

And I don’t want to scare anyone here. Sometimes when preachers talk about preaching the gospel, you think of this.

[slide: street preacher]

But the Christian experience is - in the final analysis - an experience. The gift that we can be to our community is to simply be ourselves, and to spread love and compassion in our own community. And as I said, if you go shopping these days, it’s usually pretty easy to do.

[slide: francis]

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, “Preach the gospel at all times. And if necessary, use words.” If your idea of preaching means carrying a sign, be my guest. But my sense at SHUC is that most of our preaching is done with our hands, our minds, our hearts, and our feet. But yes, as a last resort you can use words too.

St. Paul wove the gospel story into the story of the community. How do we do that here in Brantford? The modern church no longer has any real social or political power, and that’s fantastic, because Paul didn’t have any power either.

Go to the world! Share your love with the world.

*Amen.*