

On the city campus of UN-L, there's an open area behind the student union. It's a gathering space. Around the fountain, it's a relaxing space. It's a space where organizations sometimes put up their tables and booths to invite students to take part in their work.

It's also a popular place for the so-called street preachers. They bring out their signs and microphones to share their message.

The problem with many of those street preachers is that their message tends to be very focused on a moral message. It's a message designed to scare people into believing in Jesus. The ones I've heard have sometimes pointed to women wearing what young women wear when the weather is warm and calling them bad names.

They believe gay people are going to hell and are pretty vocal about it. They preach against alcohol and drug use and premarital sex. I have not heard that many of them, but I've not heard one preach about love.

Occasionally students will try to argue with them. A few agree with them. Mostly they ignore them. I'll wager they almost never convert anyone. It's images like that and the traditions that go door to door trying to peddle their beliefs that sometimes come to mind when we think about witnessing.

Pastor Adam White was the Lutheran Center campus pastor for 13 years. Partly based on things he'd heard from other campuses and partly as a response to the street preachers at the City Union, Pastor Adam did something different.

He set up two chairs, dressed up in his clerical clothes, and put up a sign that said "Rant to me about religion. I'll listen." He got a lot of takers. Not all ranted. Some had questions and thoughts about theology or the Bible. Some shared their struggles with school and being away from home.

And some did rant. But more than ranting, they shared their experiences with a church and church people who hurt them. It is an unfortunate reality that some of the followers of Jesus have harmed people. Jesus preached love of neighbor and embraced the tax collectors and sinners and lepers and other outcasts. But not all Jesus' followers got that memo.

In this pride month, we remember especially that some churches and religious parents have ostracized their gay or trans kids in the name of religion. The risk for suicide in LGBTQ young people is 4 times higher than for others. And one of the biggest predictors of suicide in LGBTQ young people is rejection by the people they love.

So, when we read about Paul, and think about the work of the Holy Spirit to empower Jesus' followers for witness, we bring along a lot of baggage...baggage created by damning and hurtful words spoken allegedly in the name of Jesus.

That baggage makes it exceedingly difficult for 21st Century Christians. So, most of us Lutherans just don't really witness. We may not even think it's a good thing to do, given the baggage. But then that leaves the harsh hurtful witness to become the default view others get of Christianity.

And that's not what this hurting world needs. A hurting world needs to hear Christians who witness to love...to a way of life...the kingdom of God...that values all people and all of creation.

What I want to do this morning is take a look at Paul's work in Athens and make some comparisons to what Pastor Adam did at UN-L, and maybe help us find a way forward to our own witness.

Athens was one of the intellectual centers of both ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Socrates, Plato, Epicurus, and many more scholars lived and worked in Athens. Religion and philosophy were favorite topics of discussion in Paul's day.

The Athenians were open to new ideas – in fact, this story tells us they would spend all their time telling or hearing something new.

Paul was distressed to see all the idols. He first went to the synagogue and Jews in the market place...what are you doing about all these idols? he might have asked.

The philosophers heard him and were concerned about what Paul was preaching.

He was taken to the Areopagus. The Areopagus, known as Mars Hill in Latin, was a place where philosophical debates took place. It was also a little like a court house to try certain crimes.

There, Paul did something important. He found a connection...a way to meet the Athenians where they were. He spoke about the altar to the unknown God. And he told them, I can tell you who that unknown God is and about Jesus who embodied that God.

And he went on to tell the story.

The Athenians were curious and loved a good debate. They weren't necessarily opposed to a new god. What most of them were opposed to was the exclusivity of this God Paul talked about. They did not believe repentance was needed. And they scoffed at the notion of resurrection.

For the most part, he was not successful at attracting new followers. But a few were convinced. A few verses later we hear about a handful of converts.

But at the end of what we read, it's left open. They weren't sure. But, they wanted to hear more.

So, let's set this story next to Pastor Adam's story and make some comparisons between their approach, but also those things that might help us.

The first thing Paul did was simply notice. He noticed the idols everywhere. He noticed the altar to the unknown god. Pastor Adam's initial thing was also to notice – to notice the street preachers yes. But also to notice that most of the young people on campus were not likely to come to his church, or any other.

We've of course noticed the same things. We too notice idols. We notice the things people put their faith, hope and trust in that can't possibly be ultimate – things like power, money, a particular economic system, the nation, the flag, celebrities. We can notice the idols that hold empty promises.

And in the midst of that, we notice we live in a world where people are hurting.

By noticing, Paul could meet the Athenians where they were. He was distressed by the idols. But he didn't lead with scorn and condemnation. He found something – the altar to the unknown god – that enabled him to connect with them.

He knew the altar to the unknown god was a reflection of their deep spirituality. He also connected to their love of philosophy – the quote “in him we live and move and have our being” comes from a Greek poet.

Pastor Adam, and his successor Pr. Liz who has continued the practice, extended an invitation that worked to connect. A sign that said “rant to me about religion. I'll listen” is a perfect connection point. We know that many people, especially young people, are disillusioned with organized religion. Rather than trying to convince them of anything, Adam began by simply listening. He met them where they were, like Paul and the Athenians.

Once Paul had connected, then he told the story...he told them the good news of Jesus and the resurrection. That was hard for the Athenians to believe. It's even harder in our skeptical post-Enlightenment world.

In fact, I think some of the trouble for the Christians today is that we don't exactly know what story to tell. Obviously, the fundamental story is the same as it was for Paul. And for that matter Jesus. It's the story of the unfolding kingdom of God.

I realized as I was writing this, it's at least two sermons. In the next Sunday or two, we're going to focus a little more closely on our own times.

What is the Holy Spirit up to in our time? How is the Spirit calling us to witness in our time and place?

For Paul and early apostles, it was the story of Christ's death and resurrection for the salvation of the world. It hasn't changed. But Paul needed to find a way into the story that could connect with the intellectual Athenians.

And from the few who did come to believe, the Christian church grew even in Athens over time.

The story has been corrupted at different times in history. In the Medieval church it became all about avoiding hell. The most dominant voice in Christianity today has brought that back.

Perhaps the worst corruption of all time is the one we've seen grow since the 70's in this country – the equation of Christianity with far-right politics. That has produced a vicious story that hurts vulnerable people.

One way we can witness, in the right context, is to simply share our own experience of God. That can make a huge difference in the life of someone who is struggling and needs a bit of hope. But there is a bigger narrative – the one Paul told. How do we tell that story in a way that works today?

We'll go into that more next week as we look at the way the Holy Spirit seems to be moving in our time.

At the heart of how the story needs to be told is the same thing that Paul discovered and the same thing Pastor Adam did. Start where people are. And listen. The dominant voice of Christianity has gotten so loud and insistent, there's no space to just listen...listen to the fears and heartaches.

The real story is so much more beautiful than what passes for the gospel in some circles. The gospel can change lives. It can even, in this now and not yet time of the kingdom of God, bring little pieces of the kingdom into the present. And that's still the story to be told.