Building Bridges Instead of Walls
Acts 17_16-34

When we look at all that is happening around the world today, we see so much conflict and division among people. We see divisions between people of different philosophies, different religions, different ethnic groups, and different political persuasions.

The political unrest in Egypt and the brutal war in Syria are seen in the news every night. These and many other events around the world give evidence of the divisions and hatred in our world.

In our own country, the racial mistrust and prejudice are very evident in the trial of George Zimmerman and in the tragic death of Trayvon Martin.

It would be easy to get caught up in this divisiveness, to take sides, and to build walls of hate.

But that is not what God has called us to do! He has called us to be bridge builders. He has commissioned us to build bridges of love to all people. To reach out to people that are different, people with different religious beliefs, different philosophies, different life styles, different moral values, and different ethnic backgrounds.

There are all kinds of differences. Some drive trucks, some drive compact hybrid cars, some wear cowboy
boots, and some wear tennis shoes. We’re just called to build bridges no matter what the differences are.

When the Apostle Paul was in Athens, Greece, he gave us a marvelous demonstration of how to Build Bridges.

Read Acts 17:16-34

T. S. How do we build bridges of love today?

1. Go to where the people are

In the day when Paul was in Athens, it was a cultural center of the world with a world-famous university. It had beautiful architecture and art, but Paul could not enjoy all of that because he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. The one Greek historian (Pausanias) says that there were more idols in Athens than in all the rest of Greece combined.

Athens was the intellectual capital of the world and yet it had no knowledge of the one true, creator God. It was inundated with the immorality associated with the worship of false gods. The city was filled with fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and prostitution. There were temples filled with male and female prostitutes. There were pornographic depictions all over the city.
Paul could have withdrawn and had nothing to do with such an evil city and its people. He could have just stayed in his own private monastery and waited there till Salas and Timothy came to get him. But instead, Paul went to where the people were.

In Acts 17: 17 it says, that Paul reasoned in the synagogue and in the marketplace. He went to the people that were like him in the synagogue and to people that were different from him in the marketplace.

How many people did Paul know when he first came into the city of Athens? (none) He made the effort to meet people.

He went to where the people were in that city. He engaged the people in conversation. He tried to develop relationships. He went back to the same places and the same people day after day. He brought up the subject of God. He tried to answer their questions. That is what it means when it says he reasoned with the people. He told them the Good News! That is how you build bridges of love.

ILL. Beverly and I took Brent Sorrels and two of his associates out to lunch this week and they took us into the Vietnamese community here in Port Arthur. We ate lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant. Brent showed us a grocery store here he goes regularly to do a Bible study
with the Buddhist family that owns the store. He also told us about he and Kahn invited the Buddhist Monk to go to lunch with them. That is how you build bridges of love.

T. S. How do we build bridges of love today?
1. Go to where the people are and...
2. Be positive instead of negative.

Paul could have become angry and lashed out at people of Athens. He could have gone out into the streets and started yelling at the people that they were a bunch of wordmongers, adulterers, and idolaters. He could have told them that they needed to tear down all their idols and temples and stop worshiping pagan gods. All of that would have been true. But it would have been deeply displeasing to God.

At the Southern Baptist Convention in Houston, we had the unpleasant experience of having angry people with ugly signs yelling those kinds of things at us. Let me assure you that it does not build bridges, only walls.

Instead of being negative which Paul could have done, he chose to be positive. He spoke to them in a positive way. He didn’t attack them for their false philosophies. He found something positive to say about them. He complimented the people of Athens.
Look at Acts 17:22. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." NIV

Paul says “I see that you are trying”. What Paul did was pleasing to God.

Believers are never told to go to the lost world and attack them for their immoral lifestyle or to chastise them for their ungodly behavior. When we do that, we build walls of hate.

We are called to build bridges of love over which we may convey the Good News of Jesus the Messiah. Believers are to take the Good News to the World because it is the power of salvation.

God changes people from the inside out. To reform the outside without changing the heart doesn’t do any good.

T.S. How do you and I build bridges?

1. Go to where the people are.
2. Be positive instead of negative and...

3. Look for common ground.
When Paul spoke at the Areopagus, we get some great insights into how to find common ground. It is clear from what he said that he worked to understand the culture and the thinking of the people of that city. He looked for ways he could introduce them to Jesus.

Paul saw that the city was full of idols but instead of just turning away in disgust, he looked for some common ground that would allow him to explain who God was and who Jesus was.

Look at Acts 17: 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. NIV

He used their own belief that there was a God that they did not know. He found some common ground. He found something that they could agree on and began there. Such an introduction was designed to get the attention of his critical audience. He had been ridiculed and called a “babbler”. This was a tough audience.

T.S. How do you and I build bridges?
1. Go to where the people are.
2. Be positive instead of negative.
3. Look for common ground and ...
4. **Start** where they are and bring them to Jesus.

*Paul started with the God of creation*, not Abraham, or Moses or even Jesus.

**Look at Acts 17:24** "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man's design and skill. NIV

**It is very important that you and I understand that the people of our world do not all worship the same God.** Though they call what they worship god, it does not have the **attributes** of the God of the Bible. *Paul described the attributes* of the one true God in order to **distinguish** Him from all the false gods they worshiped.
(1) The one true God created the world and **everything** in it.

(2) He is the **sovereign** ruler of the universe.

(3) He is **not confined** to a temple.

(4) He does **not need our worship** or anything.

(5) He is the **giver of life**.

(6) **All people** came from one man created by God.

(7) God desires that we would **know Him**. He cares about us and is near to us. We **can connect** with him.

**Paul had done his homework.** He studied their culture looking for ways to explain who God was. He used their **own literature** to help them understand the one true God.

**Paul started where they were and brought** them to Jesus.

**Look at Acts 17:30** In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by **raising him from the dead.**" NIV
So Paul brings them to Jesus. We may not start with Jesus, but we always bring them to Jesus. **He is the way, the truth, and the life** and no one comes to the Father except through him.

So here is the Challenge. Be a Bridge Builder
1. Go to where the people are
2. Be positive instead of negative.
3. Look for common ground.
4. Start where they are and bring them to Jesus.

Pray: