

“Don’t Forget the Punch Line”

Acts 17:22-31

*Speak to us O God as we seek your word
in the midst of the varied experiences of life.
Speak to reassure, to comfort and to challenge us, Amen.*

One of the news that caught my attention recently was the one featured by CNN entitled ‘Atheist Soldier Claims Harassment.’ It is about Army Spc. Jeremy Hall, who is known as the “atheist guy” called immoral and devil worshipper by those who disagree with him. He filed his lawsuit against the government in September 18 while stationed in Qatar. He said, “Other soldiers learned of it, and he feared for his own safety. Once, Hall said, a group of soldiers followed him, harassing him, but no one did anything to make it stop.”

According to CNN, The Army told him it couldn't protect him and sent him back to Fort Riley, Kansas. He resumed duties with a military police battalion. He believes that his promotion to sergeant has been blocked because of his lawsuit...” He turned to the Military Religious Freedom Foundation for help. He said, "It's just about time somebody said something" about pressure to believe in God.” (CNN News April 26, 2008)

Strange as it may sound but atheism was one of the charges that the early Church had to face for failing to conform to the religion of the majority. However, the tide was turned in 313 AD when Emperor Constantine, issued the Edict of Milan, legalizing Christian worship which paved the way for the Christian faith to become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

When we read stories in the New Testament, the age of Constantine was not in the horizon yet. The story of Paul preaching in the city of Athens was set in a context where Christianity was an unknown religion. That was a period when believers have to explain patiently and proved persuasively the good news about Jesus. It took several years before the seed of faith grow, a seed planted by the women and men who preached and lived the gospel, persevered the persecution, a seed nurtured and watered by the blood of a generation of martyrs, as historians would call it.

Here in America today, it looks like roles are now reverse. There are those who believed that they are more Christians than others that they would be to do anything to force people to believe in Jesus. Anybody who would go against “the faith” – that is Christianity according to their interpretation will be labeled names and will be harassed by being forced to listen to their condemnation. I had that experience yesterday on the J train. In the Philippines they will board the bus before it leaves the terminal and preached relentlessly, prayed for a safe travel and collect an offering.

The other news that I find amazing was about the Boston Red Sox Shirt that was buried as a curse in the newly built Yankee Stadium. One of the construction workers who was a Red Sox fan secretly buried the shirt as intended but brag about it while drinking. It became sensational news and the management had to dig that # 34 David Ortiz jersey out of the concrete. By the way, the dirty and tattered shirt was recently sold in ebay for \$175,000. I have yet to understand why people are so passionate about baseball but I don't understand the power of a shirt buried in a stadium and causing a curse. I wonder if the so called Christian voices would be willing to issue a statement and condemn the belief of a curse such as this as an insult to the power of God and the Jesus they loved so much. Maybe some also believe that the shirt has power indeed.

So we call on Paul to preach to us as what he did in Athens, speaking to learned and sophisticated guys of his time. We wrestled last week on Jesus' words that he is the way, the truth and the life. How will we package the message in a world that believes in other gods – be it the gods of the baseball or the gods of those who believe in 'no gods' at all. I like the way one writer puts it; The problem is not that we don't believe in God...it's that we believe in too many gods

Paul's style can give us some practical insight on how to share the Christian message. He begins not by condemning but by identifying with his listeners. This is what he said: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way, for as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'

The city of Athens was described as the home of the great philosophers from Socrates to Plato, magnificent works were produced in this great city. Athens was considered the seat of a golden culture, perhaps the most shining society the world has ever known. Think about New York comparing it with other cities of the world.

Paul appealed and connected to his listeners through their religious character. He begins not about what he had to offer but what his audience had in their hearts – they who are worshippers and believers of an unknown God.

I wonder what would folks like Army Specials Jeremy Hall do not believe about God? If he does not believe in a god whose power rests of jersey shirt buried in a concrete, many of us also do not believe in such a god – we are also atheist if that is the kind of god that people worship. Maybe we can engage people in profound conversation if we identify with their longing and acknowledge the desire of their hearts.

The Paul gave a hint of the connection between what they had and he has to offer - What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you – but he did not push it yet, he went back to describe their situation. What followed was an eloquent description of God of which many in our world today can identify. Let me read it once again:

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as

though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

These are words of a learned and refined man. Imagine Paul delivering it with conviction in his heart. No desire to outwit or to shame the other but to truly reach out to their hearts. G. Campbell Morgan sums up Paul's message this way, "If you really want to find God, do not degrade yourselves in erecting images of gold and silver. Listen to the deepest fact of your own being; be silent in the presence of the mystery of what you are; and then look out beyond to that unknown God whom I declare to you." (Sermon Nuggets)

Then on the right moment, Paul delivered the punch line - While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." This man he was referring to is Jesus Christ.

He then connected his listeners desire to worship God, tough unknown to them – to the God he believes – Jesus, the risen Lord! People reacted differently upon hearing him speak about Jesus, in v 32 we read, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this."

This is the moment when we do not have control anymore. How people respond and react about Jesus is not within our power. But the punch line is what sales people call as 'closing the deal.' We can talk about the product we want to sell, we can compare it with what is in the market, we can show brochures and slides show but at some point – we have to close the deal. So is the gospel presentation at some point – we have to say the punch line.

And the punch line is about God who became flesh in Jesus – he who lived and died and rose and will come again, it is about his offer of new life for everyone who trusts in him, live a life like his and possess a compassionate heart.

For most of us the conversation about God does not happened in one setting. Some of us may not have the eloquence of Paul but we may have the compassion to stay beside a friend who struggles to make a living, or we may have the patience to listen to the outpouring of burdens from the one who carried a heavy load in life... some have the

strength to walk the second mile to serve someone who needs help, some lived the faith so well that saying the punch line comes like an easy landing. There will be times when it like landing the plane in a turbulent weather but at some point but we have to say what defines our life and our perspective of everything – our faith in Jesus, the risen Christ.

And in sharing our faith, we don't have to condemn, we are to connect and find the link that binds us with those who share the human experience of searching God what ever that means to them.

Jesus promised us his word that he will send as the spirit of truth to help and to guide us. It is now time to move beyond our comfort zones, to start circulating to the wider world and like Paul, engage other in a conversation – it may be a long conversation but whatever it takes at the end of everything – God is reminding us, don't forget the punch line!

Prayer:

*We thank you that you came to us not an unknown God
but someone who shared our experience.
Teach us O God to share responsibly
the peace and joy that we have in you. Amen.*

April 27, 2008

6th Sunday of Easter
April 27, 2008 – 1:30 P.M.

Preacher: Rev. Reuben D. Cedino
Sermon: "Don't Forget the Punch Line"

SCRIPTURE READING:

1st Reading: Acts 17:22–31
Gospel: John 14:15–21

Anthem: "Here I Am"
Fil-Am UCC Choir

Liturgist: Mr. Edwin Paul Tan

Pianist: Mr. Noel Rivera III
Organist and Choral Director: Ms. Rachel A. Dadap

Mr. Ed Olvina, Elder-in-Charge
Ms. Elsa Trumata, Steward-in-Charge
Mr. Noel Rivera, Trustee-in-Charge
Mr. & Ms. Boy and Eva Tubo, Ushers
Ms. Jingjing Mercialdo, Floral Offering