

May 17, 2020 Sermon notes - 6th Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:7-18, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

“Making Connections”

Have you ever built a bridge? The first time I ever built a bridge it was probably made of popsicle sticks over a small ‘river’ in our driveway. I may have used some broken branches as the frame and the popsicle sticks as the platform. I don’t recall the details but I have watched small children often enough to know that this is a common activity. Bridges help one side of a stream communicate with the other side and they can take many forms. Ferry boats are a kind of bridge that allow people of different communities to connect with one another without the need of a tremendous structure. I recall times of visiting Prince Edward Island by using a Ferry Board as well as driving across the causeway. The two methods accomplished a similar purpose even though they are very different solutions to the same problem. Bridges of all sorts are necessary for cultures to communicate effectively. Sometimes cultures need bridges in the form of language translators in order to facilitate communication. Biblical translators must study the culture and language of a society before taking on the task of translating scripture into a native tongue. We followers of Jesus Christ are often involved in bridge building of one kind or another and St. Paul is a good example of some of the things that are involved in good bridge building.

St. Paul and his companions had arrived in Athens as they travelled through Greece and Macedonia sharing the Good News of Jesus the Messiah. The local philosopher’s group in Athens had invited Paul to speak to the group about his message and we witness a master bridge builder at work in the passage from the Acts of the Apostles. The chasm created by the differing cultures and ideas about the nature of the world was wide. The Athenians believed in multiple gods in a pantheon of gods who were not always well behaved. St. Paul believed in one loving Creator who had entered into a Covenant with Abraham and his descendants. I admire the way in which St. Paul attempted to bridge that gap. While it wasn’t completely successful it was an impressive attempt in my opinion. He spoke about the hope that he had in a way that respected the belief of others while challenging them to examine their beliefs. The fact that he was only ridiculed rather than stoned is a mark of at least some success. Making connections with other people requires some kind of bridge and sometimes we are required to be bridge builders in order to make connections.

Even when people seem to be on the ‘same page’ bridges are necessary. In a recently posted article the Rev Stephanie Douglas-Bowman shared with her readers that as chaplain in a private girl’s school her first task is to listen. She and the teens in the school share some common philosophies but to assume complete agreement is foolish. Even when we are moved to offer help a useful question is ‘what would you like me to do?’. St. Paul did some of that work by walking around Athens and noticing what the architecture was saying and we can do some of that work by listening carefully to what someone else is saying while resisting the temptation to come up with ‘the answer’. In and through all of this process there is a helper available. Jesus told his disciples that he would send to them ‘another Helper’ who would be with them in a similar but different way. The word used literally means ‘a walking (or standing) beside you person’ and is translated as Advocate, Comforter, Helper, or Guide as it is used in

other scripture passages. The word refers to that person who goes into court with you to help you present yourself in the best possible light. It refers to that person who sits with you and holds your hand without offering any advice while you are dealing with a difficult situation. This 'Helper' is the gift that Jesus gives his followers as they go about building bridges. I suspect St. Paul asked for the Holy Spirit's help before going before the Athenian philosophers. I always ask for the Holy Spirit's help when trying to build a bridge between the world of scripture and our world through the words of a sermon. The chaplain in the girl's school asks for the Holy Spirit's help while listening to the teenage girls in order to help them find the bridge to God. When someone asks us to speak about the hope that lies within us we can ask for the Holy Spirit's help as we attempt to build a bridge of understanding between our world and our experiences and someone else's world and experience. Making connections with God and helping others make connections with God is at the heart of what we do as the Church in the world and it is always done with the "Helper" at our side. As we think of bridge building let us always remember that God is the primary bridge builder.

The story of the relationship between humanity and God is a story filled with opportunities for intimacy with the Creator which have been rebuked by humans. Sin, we are told, creates a separation between us and God and between us and other people. Something like a bridge is necessary for the separation to be overcome and further communication restored. God has done that in and through God's Messiah, Jesus. His ministry, his suffering and death on the cross, were ways in which God built a bridge for us to cross. Jesus' resurrection is a powerful signal that the bridge has been built to even withstand the worst the Devil can throw at it. When Jesus met with his disciples on the night before he was crucified he spoke about the work of bridge building in words like 'I will come again and take you to myself'. Jesus was going to usher people over that gulf fixed between God and humanity which was created through human sin. That work, he said, would continue to be effective in our lives through the work of God's Holy Spirit. So, if you ever find yourself on one side of a river with God on the other side a bridge can be built. If you are on one side of a closed door with Jesus on the other side a bridge can be built. Our God is the Master Bridge builder which is part of the reason for the hope that lies within us. There is no valley large enough that his love cannot span - no river deep enough that cannot be crossed - no ocean wide enough that will separate us forever from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Making connections is what God does and what God asks us to do. In these days the methods of making connections are going through some tremendous changes but connections are still being made. I give thanks to God for the technologies that enable us to remain in touch so that bridges can continue to be built. I thank God for the Holy Spirit - that other Helper - whom Jesus has asked the Father to send to us to assist us in the tasks which come our way. My prayer for all of us is that we will continue to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.