

“While He Was Waiting”

Acts 17:22-34

6th Sunday of Easter

May 10, 2026 (9a service)

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

I’m going to begin this morning by inviting you to think small.
I don’t just mean small.
I mean...infinitesimally small.

I want you to think on the atomic level.
In fact, I want you to think about the size of an atom.

Do you know how small an atom is?
It is one ten-millionth of a millimeter.

Put another way, half a million atoms “lined up shoulder to shoulder could hide behind a human hair.”

Now atoms are not just small.
They’re also durable.

Nobody knows for sure how long they last,
but one guess is not just a million years,
not just a billion years, but something like...
10 to the 35th power of years!

Which means, of course, that all the atoms inside of you this morning are basically recycled goods!

As the author Bill Bryson puts it in his marvelous book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*:

“Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to

becoming you. We are so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms—up to a billion for each of us—probably once belonged to Shakespeare. A billion more [perhaps] came from Buddha and Genghis Khan and Beethoven...”¹

Now...I would much prefer to imagine that I am preaching to a congregation of Shakespeares and Beethovens than Genghis Khans this morning.

But you get the point.

Our atoms have all been hanging out with one another before we gathered for worship today—which means we have a lot in common, right?

Before we ever became part of the same church family, you and I had a lot in common.

Now, it’s no stretch to say that we live in a day and age where what divides us gets a lot of play. But I think something powerful happens when we find common ground across our differences.

For example, I have a vivid memory of my freshman year at college.

We were assigned roommates.

My roommate was from Boston.

So of course, he was a Red Sox fan—and I was a Yankees fan.

¹ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, New York: Broadway Books, 2003.

As the first semester progressed, we quickly realized we had other differences. I tended to put my clothes away, he tended to leave his clothes on the floor.

I spent my Sunday mornings going to church.
He spent his Sunday mornings sleeping in.

Half-way through the year, we were thinking that by the end of the year, we'd go our separate ways.

Then we took a religion class together.
And we had an assignment on the book of Job.

We had to come up with a series of questions about the book of Job, and I'll never forget the moment when we compared our questions before going to class the next day.

He was an agnostic, non-practicing Jew.
I was a church-going Presbyterian.
We had the same list of questions.

And my 18-year-old brain suddenly realized that despite all the superficial differences I was seeing, we might have more in common than I ever realized.

That was 36 years ago.
He is one of my closest friends to this day.

It's a gratifying experience, a life-changing experience, to find common ground with someone else.

But why do I bring this up?

Because it's what the Apostle Paul did long ago, while he was waiting in Athens.

He went looking for common ground.

You see, Paul never INTENDED to go to Athens.
Do you remember how Paul ended up in Athens?

Paul is on the run.
He's just been to Beroea, where he had great success.

But there's opposition in Beroea, people who wanted him dead in Beroea. So the Christian community got scared, afraid that Paul would be caught and killed.

They send Paul away, and he gets "as far as Athens."

But when Paul arrives in Athens, he doesn't hunker down.
He doesn't decide to get some rest.

Paul decides to take a risk.
To take a chance.
To try to find, with these foreigners, some common ground.

So Paul goes the Areopagus, and he preaches.

"From one ancestor," Paul proclaims, "[God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth..."

"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.'"

In other words, Paul is reaching out to the Athenians, extending the hand of grace to the Athenians, trying to find common ground with strangers who believe different things than he does in the 1st century.

Which, come to think of it, is not such a bad idea for God’s church in the 21st century.

As Ryan Burge notes in his recent book, *The Vanishing Church*:

“The religious landscape of the United States has never looked starker than it does today. There are huge geographical swaths of America where the only place a Protestant can worship...is an evangelical church that takes a literalist view of the Bible and believes that women have no role in spiritual leadership...

“Yet...[there] are millions of Americans who miss the way that a significant portion of religion used to be—moderate, sensible, pragmatic, and unifying...

“At their best, religious institutions [like the church] are places where people from different economic backgrounds and political affiliations can sit side by side and worship together...[and eat a church potluck together, and play in a church softball league together]...the growing polarization of American religion has left us lonelier, angrier, and more divided than ever before.”²

Now, Westminster is not suffering from the decline that so many other mainline churches are suffering these days. When anyone asks what our membership numbers are like, I point them to the nursery. It used to be that average nursery attendance on Sundays was, say, 25.

² Ryan Burge, *The Vanishing Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2026.

Now it's 50.

On days like Christmas or Easter or even Confirmation Sunday...it can be upwards of 80 or 90 or 100.

But those numbers are not just a gift.
They represent a responsibility.
A holy calling to be different than our divisive society.

So how do we do it?
How do members of a church like Westminster create common ground?

In one of her books, the Presbyterian Anne Lamott writes:

“If I were going to begin practicing the presence of God for the first time today, [I would] begin by admitting three...truths of our existence:

- a) that we are so ruined,
- b) that we are so loved,
- c) that we are in charge of so little.”³

I think Lamott is onto something here, when it comes to finding common ground.

We are so ruined...

Lamott did not say this as a discouraging statement.
She said it as a HOPEFUL statement.

³ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

You see, I believe that common ground is found in churches where we can ADMIT OUR OWN BROKENNESS, a place where we can be vulnerable and ruined and the people who surround us here will NOT run away.

Kate Braestrup is a chaplain in Maine.

She tells of the time that Nina's mother came up to her and said, "Chaplain, I think I have a problem. It's Nina. She says she wants to go and see Andy, her cousin."

Chaplain Braestrup said, "How old is Nina again?"
Her mom said, "Five."

And the problem for Nina's mother was that Andy, Nina's 4-year-old cousin, had recently died in a sudden, tragic accident. Andy's body was at the funeral home, and Nina wanted to visit her cousin, but Nina's parents...they didn't want to upset their daughter by bringing her to see Andy's dead body.

The parents waffled, and they waffled, but finally—they decided to let Nina go see her cousin.

When they got to the funeral home, Nina's parents said to her:

"Nina, we just want to make sure that you understand that Andy's not going to be able to talk to you."

"Yup," Nina replied.

And Nina opened the door and went in and she walked right up to the table where Andy's body lay. She walked all the way around the table, putting her hands on him to make sure he was all there. Then she put her head down on his chest and talked to him.

After about ten minutes of this, Nina’s parents were awash in tears, so they said, “Nina, you ready to go?”

“No,” Nina replied. “I’ll tell you when I am.”

And she sang Andy a song, and she put his Fisher-Price plastic telescope in his hand, so that he could see anyone he wanted to see from heaven.

And then she said, “I have to tuck him in.”

So she walked all the way around the table again, tucking in the quilt that Andy’s mother had made for him when he was a baby. Then Nina put her hand on him, and said, “I love you, Andy Dandy.”

When Kate Braestrop is mentoring younger colleagues in chaplaincy, she tells them:

“You can trust a human being with grief.”

She says to her colleagues:

“...walk fearlessly into the house of mourning,
for grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy.

And after all these mortal human years,
love is up to the
challenge.”⁴

Friends, I think THIS is what most of us crave, deep down, when we come to church.

⁴ As told on The Moth, “The House of Mourning,” at [The Moth | The Art and Craft of Storytelling](https://www.themoth.com/stories/the-house-of-mourning).

A place where we can trust others with our brokenness, a place where the love of God is up to the challenge.

We are so ruined, writes Lamott...
and so loved...

Do you remember at the beginning of this sermon, when I asked you to think small?

Now I want you to think BIG. Because that's what Presbyterians believe about the love of God. That God's love is so much broader and wider and deeper than any of us can imagine.

My friend and colleague, Amy Miracle, recently recalled a time when she was visiting her adult daughter in Alaska. They attended the Youth Traditional Games. It's a gathering of native people from all over Alaska, who compete in events rooted in their history and culture.

The welcoming ceremony took place in a high school gym. There was a native dance troupe who played drums and chanted. And their final song was a summoning of the clans.

The one doing the summoning was an older woman.
She was short in stature, but long on charisma.
She had a warm, booming voice that filled the entire gym.

First, she called the Eagle clan into the dance.

And people of all ages came down from the bleachers and joined in. They did the movements of the Eagle clan, and sat back down in the bleachers.

As Anne Lamott put it:

We are so ruined, and so loved,
and in charge of so little...

Going back to our text one more time, after Paul preaches at the Areopagus, what's the response? Are all those Athenians moved to march down the center aisle, singing, "Just As I Am?"

Not at all.

Luke tells us:

"When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'"

"But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris..."

Hmmm....

I'm wondering how many of you can name the saints who are responsible for planting seeds of faith in you.

Who was the most important person to shape your faith?

Do you know who the most important person was to shape THEIR faith?

The thing is, after a few generations, you and I will probably never know. We'll never know who it was who passed the faith to the person who passed the faith to the person who passed the faith...all the way back to the apostles.

Maybe your line of faith began with Peter at Pentecost.

Or maybe it began when Paul was in Athens.

Maybe Damaris is your great, great, great, great....
however many greats it takes, grandmother in faith.

Do you know what God will do, in you and through you, if you go searching, like Paul went searching, for a little common ground this week?

Of course not.
But friends, that's the good news of the gospel.

It's not up to us.
It's up to God.

Go find some common ground with neighbor or stranger or a member of your family this week, and trust...trust that God will be at work in you.

Amen.