

LIGHT YOUR CANDLE

Ps. Waweru Njenga – 16 August 2015

Imagine Me Series

Sermon Notes



We began a series 2 weeks ago entitled, ‘**Imagine Me**’ or ‘why ordinary people like me and you can change the world’. As we celebrate 5 years of Mavuno’s story, we are looking at the life of Paul, one the most influential leaders of all time, in order to understand better who this community is. Previously on our series, we discovered is that there were many people far more qualified that God could have used, but somehow, He chose Paul. God is not waiting for perfect people who have their act together to spread His love. Instead, **God loves unlikely candidates!** Then last week we saw how because of Paul’s influence, the early church realized it was wrong to make it difficult for unlikely people to come to Jesus. Our takeout was ‘**don’t conform; be transformed**’.

Turn with me to **Acts 17:16-34**. And as you do so, some background...

Paul, the unlikely terrorist turned preacher, had been kicked out of the previous two towns he had visited because some people were unhappy about how popular his message was. And so he arrived in the great city of Athens alone, and spent some time there, waiting for his buddies to catch up. While waiting, Paul noticed the many idols that the people of Athens worshipped. It is said that there were more idols than people in Athens! He was greatly distressed to see how these people were worshiping false gods. Let’s see what happened next.

Read Acts 17:16-21 (NIV):

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babblers trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

At the time of the Greek empire ruled by Alexander the Great, Athens had been the political capital of the world. In the time of Paul, the Greeks had been colonized by the Romans and Rome was the center of power. But Athens was still the cultural capital of the world. It defined global culture in many ways. Every educated Roman spoke the Greek language and most of the New Testament is written in Greek, which shows just how influential Greek culture was. Athens was the center of arts, architecture, beauty, education, philosophy and sports, and many intellectuals, artists and refined people lived there.

Paul was always looking for an opportunity to tell people about the love of Jesus Christ and his power to change people's lives. So the first thing he did was go to the synagogue, where Jews and 'God-fearing Greeks' met. These were people with whom he had a similar religious and cultural background. The bible tells us that his approach whenever speaking in synagogues was to show from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for. For example **Acts 17:2-3** tells us *'as his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said'.*

But in addition to speaking in the synagogue, Paul also went out to into the marketplace. The marketplace in Athens was **the center of culture**. Don't think of it as just a place to shop like downtown Kampala, but think of it more like a mall or a popular pub – a hangout place where people went to relax and catch up with the latest news.

You see, the people of Athens loved debating and gossiping about the latest ideas! So basically, every day, Paul just went to where people were chatting, joined the conversation, listened in but also shared his perspective – 'hey have you guys heard about Jesus? Do you know he's back from the dead? Do you know he loves you and has a purpose for you?' Some philosophers heard him speaking and at first they wrote him off. Some of them called him a babbler – the word there connotes a bird just pecking at indiscriminately at seeds – in other words, **he was quite shallow!** Others heard him talk about Jesus and the resurrection and thought he was trying to introduce two new foreign gods. So they summoned him to a meeting of the city council, the Aeropagus, so that they could evaluate this new teaching and see if it was worth adapting.

Now there were two main groups of intellectuals in Athens.

- a. **The Epicurians were materialists.** They believed that enjoying this life is all that mattered and that there was no such thing as life after death. Their motto was "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." All around Athens were sensuous nude statues and there were many temple prostitutes. To the Epicurians, you only lived once, and the only thing worth pursuing was a good life and pleasure. You're probably realizing as I speak that you know quite a few Epicurians in our culture today!
- b. **The Stoics, were pantheists.** In other words, they believed that God is found in all of nature. Everything is god and god is everything. All truth is God's truth and all routes lead to God. They worshipped nature, believed in tolerance, your reality is yours and mine is yours. The Stoics taught the key thing in life is to be detached from emotions – don't get too excited about any one thing. I suspect as I speak that you also know some Stoics! These are the guys who wanted him to address them.

And so Paul began his TED talk. Let's read it together... **Read Acts 17:22-34.**

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. "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 human

hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "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 human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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 everyone by raising him from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

I want you to note two things about how Paul shared with the Athenians...

1. **He started where they were** - Interestingly, even though he was distressed by idol worship, Paul didn't criticize the Athenians for worshiping idols or act like he was more spiritual than them. In fact he began by affirming something good about them; "I see in every way you are very religious – that's awesome!" You see, Paul had taken time to listen to them and to understand their culture. He could see the brokenness – the worship of idols that greatly distressed him. But he could also see the beautiful things – the hunger for God that caused them to be religious. For example, these people had so many idols, they reached a place where they said, 'were not sure if we've covered all the bases – so just in case... let's put up one for 'the unknown God''. And Paul said, 'let me show you who this unknown God that you've been worshiping really is'. And on that common ground, he was able to introduce them to the God who made the world and everything in it.

Because God is the creator of the whole world, there are traces of beauty in every culture that reflect God's nature. But because of human sinfulness, there are also idols in every culture that Christians must confront. The idols and brokenness of our culture are easier to see but it takes patient listening and observation to see the things that are starting points for the gospel. Please turn to the person next to you and gently say, when you are in this world

Wherever we go, God has already gone there before us. We need to look for traces of what He is doing and join Him in it, and this is what Paul was doing. The 2nd thing to note is that...

2. **He spoke their language** – The interesting thing is that unlike in the synagogues, Paul did not quote the bible even once! He introduced them to the good news about God's love by quoting their own famous poets. 'For in him we live and move and have our being' were famous words by Epimenides, one of their most famous philosophers. 'We are his offspring' were the words of a Stoic poet called Aratus. Both these quotes were from poems about Greek gods! **But Paul was not afraid to share the gospel about Jesus using the language and cultural forms that his audience was familiar with.** Quoting their own philosophy, he was able to show the Epicurians that yes indeed there is a God and that the world is not a random place. And also to show the Stoics that the true God cannot be made by humans like an idol. As a result, we are told that several people in that distinguished forum

believed in Jesus. [Did you know you don't have to be deep or a Bible scholar to lead people to faith? My unsaved brother once led a lady to Christ with not even a basic understanding of the Bible!](#)

Sadly, this is not always the approach that Christians have taken through the ages. For example, when missionaries came to Uganda, many Ugandans had to take Western names when baptized to symbolize they were now Christians. Many of us have a 'Christian name', which is supposed to be an English name. Another example - among most African Tribes, ancestors played a huge role, and it was common as people drank wine to pour out a libation on the ground to those who'd gone before them. They called their ancestors 'pepo'. However, the missionaries felt this was devil worship and when the bible was translated, the word they used for the devil is 'pepo'. They literally demonized the culture, and the result is that Christianity is still seen by many as a Western religion. Although they were certainly well meaning, it was easy to pass on English culture instead of biblical Christianity!

One of the reasons Christians are often caught on the wrong side of culture is that we often attack the brokenness we see without listening and understanding. Whether it's abortion or promiscuity or homosexuality. When we encounter something we don't agree with, we're quick to point fingers but not quick to befriend, listen or understand. And this can keep us from engaging in conversations and understanding our culture enough to speak God's truth boldly in the language of the people around us. [A major part of how Christianity was introduced was to curse the culture and people as darkness because of their sin. But Paul did not spend time cursing anything, all he did was to let Christ's truth shine. In the darkest of places. When you are in our cultures places of sin, **don't curse the darkness, Let Christ Shine!**](#)

Five years ago when we started Mavuno Church, our passion was that we would always be a church that went where people were, understood their culture and brought the truths of scripture into that culture in a language they understood. It meant doing things that other Christians sometimes found scandalous – taking popular songs in the culture and saying – “these unknown idols you are worshiping - let me show you what it is that you were looking for” and teaching the truths of scripture through them.” It meant understanding the language and aspirations of this generation in order to help them meet Jesus where they were. And it also meant helping our people create a passion to see their culture transformed by the love of Jesus. [**Don't curse the darkness, Let Christ shine!**](#)

As Christians, we often profess that Jesus is the answer and I have absolutely no problem with that. It's good to know what the answer is. But it's also important to know the questions! Whether it's in the office where you work, or in the gym where you work out, or in the lives of fellow parents at your children's school, there are people around you who beneath that tough professional exterior are hungry for Jesus. But if you don't listen enough to know the questions they're asking, your faith will seem completely irrelevant to them! It's been said that 'people don't care how much you know if they don't know how much you care'. Even at home, that brother that the whole family gave up on; who last sat with them and asked them their aspirations, where they're going, what they desire? You may be coming to him with answers to questions he's not asking. You have the right answer to the wrong question! But if you could understand his questions/needs, you are able to show him how every aspiration he has, this is what Jesus is the answer is to. You may know what God's word says, but you need to understand where he's coming from. [**Don't curse the darkness, let Christ shine!**](#)

Each of us here has a space where you are best equipped to take the good news about Jesus and his power to transform people. You who is a lawyer/stockbroker/clothes seller – there are people that you are best positioned to share the gospel with.

(I'm still wondering how to work with this clip, if at all)

ILLUSTRATION: Njihia Njoroge who worked with EABL. Eventually resigned and went into business. But really broken and distressed by the alcoholism he saw in the bars. Eventually decided to start a bar-church! Metameta bar has pulled many out of alcoholism. He started where they were and he is speaking their language. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECdwrcWRK3g>

Also commend Seanice Kacungira(UG) & Annie Chisala (Malawi) who speak about Mavuno sermons or radio during the week.

Where has God has called you to represent Him? Are you aware of what the questions the people around you have? ***Don't curse the darkness, Light your Candle!***

PRAY

Help us to influence the society wherever you have placed us...

- a. Those of us who've been cursing the darkness, instead of taking opportunities to share Christ.*
- b. Create a truly lost my 5 list to reach this year*
- c. Sign up to serve in our outreach*