

You Are Where You Are for a Reason

Well hey everybody. If you listen to our podcast regularly, I realize this probably **sounds a little different** than normal right now. And that's because we had to call off our Gathering this Sunday due to a high number of COVID-19 cases in our area, as well as several people on our staff and leadership testing positive.

And just because I've had several people ask me already, **I am indeed one of those positive cases** among our staff. I tested positive on Tuesday, and so far I feel almost completely fine—just some congestion and a few aches. So would appreciate your prayers as you think about it for me and the family, mostly just for our sanity as we've all been quarantined for at least five days. It's not a big house and five days at home is a long time for a six and two year old. But more importantly, pray for everybody in similar situations (and even much worse situations) in our church and in our city. I've texted with I think five different people just in *my LifeGroup* this week who have tested positive. So it's just kinda everywhere right now.

But all of that said, we **didn't want to let a canceled Gathering** keep us from continuing on in our series all about *mission*. So what I want to do for the next little bit in this podcast is just walk you through **one big idea**. This will be a much *shorter* teaching than normal, and that's fine—because the idea I want to get across is actually very simple. If you've been around City Church long, and especially if you've gone through our City Church Class, this idea will sound very familiar to you. But at the same time, I think it is a very easy idea to *forget* in the day-to-day hustle of our lives. But it is absolutely *crucial* to living on mission. I would argue if you miss this concept, you will have a hard time making much progress at all when it comes to demonstrating and articulating the gospel to people. So I want to just spend a little bit of time making sure we wrap our minds around it well.

So **if you have a bible** or bible app nearby, go with me to **Acts chapter 17**. The book of Acts, if you're unfamiliar, is basically a detailed account of the growth of the early Church. It starts with Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, and then it follows his disciples as they get this thing called "the Church" up and going. A lot of it actually follows a *new* disciple of Jesus named Paul, who eventually became the guy who wrote the majority of the New Testament. And the story we're about to read is about *him*.

It starts with him wandering through a city called *Athens*—as in *Greece*, not *Georgia* (although, credit where credit is due: way to go Bulldogs on the Natty this week). But this isn't *that* Athens; it's Athens, *Greece*. And as Paul walks through the city, he sees *idols* everywhere. As in, foreign gods that people there were worshiping. We talked about this

some in last week's teaching: how within the Roman empire, they would have "pantheons" set up where you could go and worship whatever god you wanted to worship. Paul is seeing something along those lines, lots of different gods, and he decides to take advantage of the opportunity.

Let's pick things up in v. 22:

*[22] Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! (which is a great way to start a talk. I might try it out sometime. "People of Knoxville!") I see that in every way you are very religious. [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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.***

Now, I know that might sound a little aggressive to us, and sometimes Paul is an aggressive sort of guy. But here, he's probably aiming for more *provocative* than he is *aggressive*. That word "ignorant" is just another form of the word "unknown" that is on the inscription he's talking about. It just means to *not know* something. He's saying "since you're saying you don't know who this god is, I'd love to tell you a bit about him." In context, he's talking to a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers—so they actually love new ideas and educating themselves in things unknown. So it's probably a little more friendly in tone than we tend to read it.

But Paul is about to tell them about the God they don't know about. Here he goes, v. 24:

[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 human hands. [25] And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

In other words, "he's not like these other gods. He doesn't live in temples, and he doesn't need anything. On the contrary, he's actually the *giver* of life." He's the *creator* God. And then take a look at this next part, because this is the part I want us to camp out on, v. 26:

*[26] 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.** [27] God did this so that (here's the reason) they would **seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.***

Okay, track with what Paul is saying. He says this true, creator God made all the nations (and by that, he means all *people* of every nation). And he also determined the *times in history* that they would live, as well as the precise *places* they would live. And he did all of that for one primary purpose, which is that those people would “seek him,” “reach out for him,” and “find him,” though he is not far from any one of us.

Now, please: whatever you do, please do not overlook the profundity of that statement. Don't do the thing we do sometimes as Christians where we go “yeah, *of course* God made everybody. And *of course* he determined *when* we would live and *where* we would live. And *of course* he wants people to know him. Of course he did all that—he's *God*.” Yes, he is. But there are some very *practical* implications of that being true that we have to realize together.

If it is true that God determines the times and places people live, for the express purpose of people entering into a relationship with him, that means that you and I are where we are for a reason. If God put the people around us where *they* are for that reason, and he put you and I where *we* are for that reason, that means everything you and I do and everywhere you and I go just got *infused* with purpose. And that purpose is for you to live on *mission* there.

So this means that you *live* where you *live* for a reason. Whatever neighborhood or apartment or dorm or glorified shoebox you happen to live in, God has you there because he wants you to be on *mission* there. It means that you *work* where you *work* because God wants you to be on mission there. You go to school where you go to school because God wants you to be on mission there. You're in the *classes* you're in because God wants you to be on mission there. You take your *kids* to school or daycare wherever you do, because God wants you to be on mission there. You *grocery shop* where you grocery shop for this reason. You frequent the restaurants and coffee shops and bars you frequent for this reason. Everything you and I do and everywhere you and I go, all of a sudden, *matters*. Because God has a mission for us there.

Now, maybe you *hate* where you live. Maybe you hate where you work. Maybe you hate where you go to school. Maybe you're not a big fan of *any* of those places. And I get that. But I would argue that when there is a grander purpose *behind* something, it can make a lot of unbearable things, *bearable*.

Just as an example: the first real job I ever worked in high school was as a member of the grounds crew for a Parks & Rec department. And trust me: it was nowhere *near* as fun and *funny* as the show *Parks & Rec*. Not even a little bit. It was a summer job, so a

lot of long, very hot days in the sun. Early mornings. It was hard work. I was thankful for it, but it wasn't a job that you brag about to your friends.

But here's the thing: there was a reason I took that job. It was because my dream was to own a 1994 Jeep Wrangler. It might 've been my dream to own a newer one, but I couldn't afford a new one. But I wanted that Wrangler. I wanted to be able to drive it around town with the top off. Take it mudding with friends—that was the dream. And because there was a *purpose* behind the job, I could deal with the long summer days involved. I could bear it. Because *purpose* can make a lot of unbearable things bearable.

And so part of living on mission is realizing that God has placed a *purpose* behind where you are and what you do in your life. And the purpose is befriending the people God puts you around, and asking how you might be a part of helping them come to know Jesus. That person in the office next to yours that you can't *stand* because they're horrible to you and everybody else: that might be true. But God may have put them there so that you can build a friendship with them, get to know them and help them discover who Jesus is (...and who knows—maybe even become a little less horrible as a result).

That neighbor you have who always blows all the grass clippings on your yard and doesn't seem to even notice or care that they're doing it: they may be annoying. But God might have them living next to you so they can come to know Jesus. That classmate. That friend. That server. That bartender. Whoever it is. Part of participating in God's mission is learning to see the people you come into contact with on a daily basis not as inconveniences, not as obstacles, not as people who make life more frustrating or more difficult for you—even if that's true. But rather seeing those people as people God may want you to befriend in the hopes that they one day discover who Jesus is.

So if what we're reading in Acts 17 is true, we'd do well to view our life and our rhythms and our circumstances that way: so that people might "reach out and find God, though he is not far from any of us." So that's it: that's the big idea. Like I told you: very simple, and at the same time: completely paradigm-shifting for our everyday lives: *you are where you are for a reason*.

So I want to show you briefly as we close about how to connect all this to this week's practice in the practice guide. Practice #3 in that booklet is called a "Neighboring Chart." If you've been around a few years, you might remember this from our *Neighboring* series. But I think it's a really useful tool when it comes to building relationships with those around us.

Basically the way it works is that you imagine *yourself* in the middle of the chart. Maybe you're imagining your house on your street. Or your apartment in your apartment complex. Or maybe it's your desk or your office or just where you *stand* at work. Just imagine some sphere of your life, and imagine you in the middle. The goal is to go around the chart and jot down the things you currently know, relationally about each of the people that live or work around you.

So as the instructions in the practice guide say, section A in each square is that person's *name*. So if you know it, write down their name. Maybe you just know their first name, maybe you know first and last. Maybe you know their spouse or significant other's name maybe you don't. Maybe you're going: I don't know *any* of these people's names. No problem, you've got your first step: go and introduce yourself, and learn those people's names. Not *always*, but a large percentage of the time, you can't get to know somebody very well until you know their name. So start there.

Then, for the people whose names you *do* know, move to section B. Section B is for any *surface-level details* you've learned about the person. Maybe you know from conversation that they work as an engineer. Or that they have middle-school aged kids. Or that they moved here from California. Or that they are Alabama fans, and that's why you haven't gotten to know them any further than that. Just anything you know, at a surface-level. Maybe you don't know anything, and again, there's your next step. Spend a moment or two getting to know them the next time you see them.

Then, for anybody that you know some surface level details about, move to section C. This is for somewhat deeper aspirations about that person's life. Maybe you remember them saying that they really want to travel the world one day. Or that their dream is to start a restaurant or a food truck. Or that one day they want to have a big family. This tells you a lot about people sometimes. If you don't know any of those things, ask some good questions to figure it out. Questions like "if you could do anything in the world for a living, what would it be?" Or "what would your dream life situation be?" There are all sorts of ways to draw these things out once you establish a friendship with someone.

And then finally, for any of them where you have some things in sections A, B *and* C, write down anything you've gathered about their perspective on Jesus, or faith in general, or *religion* and *spirituality* in general. This, obviously, is on an even deeper level. But I think you'll find that often, if you've put in the work to show genuine interest and care for them, stuff like this will come up over time. Or even if you ask it in a conversational way, they'll be willing to share it. The goal is learning this about people is obviously that it helps you know where they're coming from on all of that. So that you can speak in a more informed way about it with them when the opportunity comes up.

So all this is, is a way to jot down details that you've learned about people so that you don't forget them, and to help give you something to work towards in terms of deepening the relationship over time. Maybe this feels super cold and *programmatic* to you. Maybe it feels like this is turning people into projects. And that's fine—you don't have to do it this way. It's just a tool. But I would argue it's no more programmatic than putting lunch with your best friend on your calendar so that you don't forget it or double-book over it. It's just a tool, meant to help encourage you to get to know the people around you over time.

And our prayer is that by using it, we'll be prompted to view those relationships with more intentionality and purpose, and help those people "reach out for God, though he isn't far from any of us." And we're praying along the way that the Spirit of God moves through it to draw people to himself.

So we'll work on that together as a church family this week. Let me pray for us.

God, thank you that you are the creator God. That you've placed us when and where and how we are so that people might reach out and find you, although you're not far from any of us.

We ask that you would help us to see ourselves that way. That you'd help us see our lives that way, our workplaces that way, or neighborhoods and living situations that way. God would you help us see that we are where we are for a reason. And that reason is to help people find you.

So would you work in our hearts and our minds? Would you give us eyes to see the things around us as you see them? And then would you give us the courage and the desire to befriend those who need to know you?

We ask you to move and work through us, and even sometimes despite us. Amen.