

“With Open Minds”

Rev. David Gregory

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Scripture reading

Acts 17:16-20

from The Message by Eugene Peterson

The longer Paul waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy, the angrier he got—all those idols! The city was a junkyard of idols.

He discussed it with the Jews and other like-minded people at their meeting place. And every day he went out on the streets and talked with anyone who happened along. He got to know some of the Epicurean and Stoic intellectuals pretty well through these conversations. Some of them dismissed him with sarcasm: “What an airhead!” But others, listening to him go on about Jesus and the resurrection, were intrigued: “That’s a new slant on the gods. Tell us more.”

These people got together and asked him to make a public presentation over at the Areopagus, where things were a little quieter. They said, “This is a new one on us. We’ve never heard anything quite like it. Where did you come up with this anyway? Explain it so we can understand.”

In the words of Isaac Asimov, “Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won’t come in.” This first month of our journey together has coincided with the season we call Lent, as well as the vernal equinox which occurs this week. In our yearly cycle, it is about introspection, taking a critical eye to our lives – a spring cleaning, if you will, a de-cluttering: seeing which things need to be kept in place, and releasing those things which no longer serve us. This might be the time to sort through our garages and storage areas and do a significant purge. We might clean up our email accounts, donate some old clothing or books. Besides just being a good practice, it is also the metaphor of our spiritual journey, which happens in the framework of spiritual community.

This is a good time to talk about why I use the term “spiritual community” to describe our gathering here at the top of Rock Hill. It’s not to exclude faith or religion, but to remind us that it is our common spiritual **experiences** that glue us together, beyond any particular creed or body of doctrine. Community Congregational Church is at its root a contemplative place, and as the word “church” implies, many of us find Christianity to be our deeper well. It’s not the only one we have room for, but it is where many of us have been digging, some of us for many, many years. And based upon our Covenant, our agreement together, that calls us to “live out the questions together hand in hand,” we clearly give space for viewpoints other than our own. It is in the DNA of this place. We have declared to anyone who will listen that we are an open-minded people, something of which we are legitimately proud.

And so, as we've been learning, we hold this place, this work that we do, this church if you will, with open hands. We don't own it, nor do we control its outcomes. This is not a place where we exercise our private agendas. We are here to promote the common good, because there really isn't a good other than the common one. We have also learned to open our hearts to one another, taking the risk of becoming vulnerable, for to love is to be vulnerable, as we learned last week. As an example, Jesus, in an ultimate act of vulnerability, laid down his life for his friends, which many consider to be the essence of love itself.

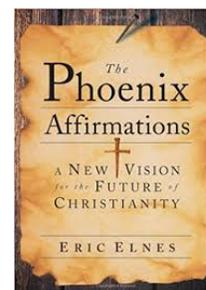
Today we join in an exercise of opening our minds. We all think of ourselves as open-minded, right? It's the other person, the one who disagrees with me, refuses to hear me out, the one who makes up her mind before I've finished my thought who is closed-minded; or so we think.

Some of the Athenians prided themselves on their open minds, their desire to learn some new thing, but they could not stand it when Paul spoke to them on the streets. What he said was so incomprehensible to them, they considered him an airhead, at least in the words of Eugene Peterson. But not all of them felt that way. There were some who were open to hearing more, and they invited him to explain what he was saying so that they could understand.

Every day, it seems, I see and hear things I cannot comprehend. I must curate the amounts of news I take in, or I get swallowed alive in disbelief, sometimes outrage. There are times when I am fearful, times when I want to scream, and times when I feel sickened. Often I feel powerless. Pretty soon after the 2016 election, I began a new blog called *Deeper Streams*. I wanted it to be a place where I could call people to deeper forms of spiritual practice, so that our activism could be fueled by something other than anger or fear. That sounds quite noble, but as I look back at some of those posts, they feel more like a cry for help. Fear has led me to write things. These things are a record of my hopes as well as my frustrations.

Today this podium is my confessional. Sometimes I get snide and snarky on social media. When I feel powerless, I default to sarcasm, and sometimes after a night of rest or an hour of meditation, I find myself deleting some of the things I've said. If I'm honest with myself, I'm like those Athenians who called Paul an airhead. But I want to join the other group that truly listens. It's not that they agreed with him, but instead, they pleaded with him, "Explain these things to us so that we can understand."

As post-modern, spiritually progressive, multi-cultural, socially conscious, environmentally concerned people, certainly we are among the most open-minded people ever to walk the earth. Right? We celebrate the Spirit in all things, in all people. Right? In 2006, a group of progressive Christian leaders met in Phoenix to craft a statement of guiding principles for what they regarded as emerging Christian faith. The book that grew out of that process is called *The Phoenix Affirmations*, penned by Eric Elnes, who you may know as the author of *Gifts of the Dark Wood*. Eric is a minister in Omaha, where his UCC congregation is now part of the Tri-faith Initiative, a single campus housing a synagogue, a mosque, and their church, with both individual and common meeting spaces. It has been fascinating to watch this idea come alive.



A few years ago, I was in a workshop that Eric led at the annual meeting of the New York Conference, where he told us the story of "Crosswalk America." You can search it on YouTube. Following the emergence of *The Phoenix Affirmations*, an array of people took part in a walk across America to highlight these progressive principles. On foot they went from

church to church, taking every opportunity to say what they were about. One Sunday they happened upon a small, humble, Baptist church somewhere in the Deep South. They entered this house of worship and found a circle of chairs where the preacher was teaching about how the world is getting worse and worse, and that Jesus is going to come and rescue the faithful in the rapture, after which God will rain judgment upon the earth during seven years of tribulation. Eric felt his heart sink. He wondered what he would say if he were called upon to say what his group was up to. Eventually it happened. He and the others with him told their story in this little Baptist church. They talked about honoring other paths besides their own. They spoke of how they were walking across America to highlight inclusion of LGBT people in the community of faith, of the stewardship of the environment for which they felt responsible, about how their faith leads them to seek racial and economic justice. When they finished, the pastor of this church invited his congregation to form a circle around these progressive sojourners. Eric said it was a little disconcerting until they realized what was happening.

The pastor offered prayer for the travelers, asking God to bless them on their way, to keep them safe, and to provide for their needs. And before it was over, they gave the sojourners the entire cash offering that day, as a token of hospitality. No one's views changed that day. The fundamentalists didn't suddenly embrace progressive views. The progressives didn't see the light and start preparing for the rapture. It was just a moment of love, of humanity, and of true hospitality. And it's more common than we think it is.

For the end of my confession today, I want to say that I've been painting with too broad a brush. It's as if I've been saying, "What an airhead," when instead the words on my lips should be, "Explain it to me so I can understand." I can honor opinions other than my own, even when I do not embrace them.

Open hands, open hearts, open minds.

May it be so.