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Speaker: Pastor Jeff Poush
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Title of sermon: Church for the City

Acts 17:16-34 NIV:

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. **17** 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. **18** A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler 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. **19** 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?" **20** You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." **21** (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

22 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. **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. **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. **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 they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. **28** 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' **29** "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. **30** In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. **31** 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."

32 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." **33** 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 to take you back in time to when you were in kindergarten. Anybody remember Show and Tell? I think they still actually do it. Show and Tell is something that kindergarten, maybe first grade teachers -- they use this to help children gain confidence being up in front of people, so they have them bring something that's important to them, and they stand in front of the classroom, and they show their friends, and then they tell them all about it. Now, part of the rules are, you can't just show them and not talk about it, right? That's just show. And you can't just tell them -- because that's just tell. Otherwise, it wouldn't be Show and Tell, would it? So, today what I wanted to do was -- I wanted to do some Show and Tell. I brought my favorite hat today. And I want to tell you about my favorite hat.

I love this hat. One of the reasons why I like it so much is because of the way it fits on my head. Not all hats are created equally -- you know this. This one fits on my noggin really well. I also like the simple design. It's not too flashy. I like the fact that the logo of my church is on the front. I love my church. And I love to be able to just kind of declare, "I go to Salem First Baptist Church" when I wear this. And on the back is my favorite part of this hat -- on the back, it says, "Church for the city." The same phrase that Pastor Leon used. Church for the city. I like that being on the back of my hat because it's a reminder of what Salem First Baptist aspires to be. You've probably heard that phrase before. We've been saying it for many years, because it's a desire of ours. But it's also, admittedly, a very loaded term. What exactly is a church for the city? What does a church for the city do? It's a loaded term, and I think it's a term that Paul would've liked. In fact, I think in the text that we just read today, I think Paul actually lives out what it looks like to be a church for the city. In a sense, Paul would be a person for the city. And as we unpack his time in Athens, I think what we're going to see are some aspirational goals, some targets for us to hit as a church so that we might become -- or be -- a church for the city.

As Paul was waiting in this town -- he was waiting for his friends Silas and Timothy -- he looked out over the city, and he was troubled by what he saw. He looked out over Athens and he saw shrine after shrine after shrine. There were these altars that were built to false gods. It's been said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than it was to find a man. And in fact, that was true. It is said that there were 30,000 altars, shrines, and statues that were built honoring the gods. And there were only probably about 10,000 men that lived in Athens. Three times as many statues and idols were built to false gods. And as Paul looked out at those, it bothered him. It angered him. Because he was defensive for the one true God that he knew, and he was motivated by this righteous indignation that began to well up in his soul. And as Paul looked out and he saw the bathhouses and the sensuality that pervaded the city -- he was provoked in his spirit, because God's desire for human sexuality was being perverted. When Paul saw all the people that were being swept up by paganism, hedonism, polytheism, and intellectualism, he was heartbroken, because he knew that apart from Jesus Christ these people were lost and without hope. Verse 16 says that while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed. So I would argue that, like Paul, a church for the city ought to be moved emotionally. Another translation of this passage says that he was provoked in his spirit. The word is -- he was experiencing a "paroxysm" which is a sudden, violent emotion. He was angry! He was disturbed deep in his soul by what he was observing. What did he see? Sensuality. Paganism. Polytheism. And at the same time, that word implies that it wasn't just anger -- it was also mingled with compassion. He was moved by compassion. It made him sad, just like when Jesus looked out over Jerusalem, and the text tells us that Jesus was moved, he was compassionate for them, because those people were like sheep without a shepherd. Paul was angry, and Paul was sad, because the Athenian culture was spiritually lost. He cared. And he was moved by what he saw.

Have you ever touched these emotions when you look out over our culture? Does it bother you that in a culture that seems to be canceling everything nowadays, we still allow pornography to be bought, sold, and viewed without an ounce of contempt? Are you moved by the injustice of rape and child trafficking? I remember after 9-11, one of my favorite talk show radio hosts said, "I'm tired of people saying that we need to pray for our country. Prayer isn't gonna do anything! What we need to do is to come together and do the hard work of repairing what has been lost. Let's stop all the spiritual talk. That's not going to help us get anything done." I'll never forget that rant. It was so depressing to hear such a clearly atheistic position, and then to have it affirmed by caller after caller after caller. When I heard that, I can remember being moved emotionally. So I ask you -- when you look at the spiritual climate of Salem, do you feel anything? Because friends, if we're gonna wear hats and shirts emblazoned with this phrase on it, and we're gonna declare that it's our desire to be a church for the city, we have to ask ourselves, Do we actually care about the lostness of our city? Is it just a trite saying, or, is it a poor conviction? Are you moved? Is your heart still soft to the prompting of the Spirit within you, or have you become jaded and hardened by the harsh realities of a culture that has drifted far from the heart of God?

Paul was provoked in his spirit. He became emotional. And I want to read to you verses 17 and 18 to see the way Paul reacted as he looked and he felt and he had anger and he had compassion, and he saw their lostness, and he felt it -- I want to read the way he reacted, it's so important: "He was greatly distressed to see the city full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogues with the Jews and the 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 dispute with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler 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." Paul in his anger didn't storm down the hill and rage on the Athenians, did he? He didn't shame them for their idolatry. He didn't cancel the Athenians in an attempt to silence them. And he didn't walk into that city driven by a desire to win an argument. Why not? Because I believe that his emotions were not driven by his flesh -- rather, his flesh was driven by the Spirit. I believe that just like you and I, Paul was indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and it was that Spirit within him that caused him to be emotionally moved. Because if you're anything like me, when your flesh is motivated by your emotion, you don't get nicer. When I lose my mind and I let my flesh and my emotions dictate my behavior, I'm not kinder, I'm not gentler, I'm not sweeter -- I'm mean! I have this little weird vein that pops out right here -- it's ugly! Paul did not go down there in a fit of rage. The Spirit that was provoked in him was motivated, was compelled, by the Spirit.

Friends, if we are ever going to have a shot at converting our culture, at compelling our culture to turn from their ways and turn to Christ, we've got to start here. We're got to start motivated by a heart desire, a Spirit-led desire to show them Jesus. Not to just go down there and beat them into submission. Anger wasn't going to get Paul to the place that he could ever share the gospel with these people. Paul's emotion wasn't driven by his flesh -- his flesh was driven by the Spirit within him. When we're led by the flesh, we get mean, we get red-faced, and we get belligerent. But when our flesh is driven by the Spirit, we get humble. And we move toward people in a way that shows them Jesus. The Holy Spirit provoked Paul. The Spirit moved him, and it motivated him to action. So he went to where the people were, and he talked to them. The text says that he reasoned with them. He reasoned with them in a reasonable way. Friends, I think we have lost the capacity to debate with folks in a reasonable way. We just don't know how to do it anymore. Because there's this inherent false belief that to disagree means you hate them. No, it doesn't! It doesn't mean that! It just means, "I disagree with you." But we don't have any practice -- we're not good at reasoning with people and debating ideas. That's all these people did, day after day. They would go down into the marketplace and they would talk about economics and politics and philosophy. And Paul knew that, so he went where the people were, so he could have discussions, and he could mingle in some conversations about this foreign God. He could tell them about a God who rose from the dead. And they could say, "Oh, this is an interesting new theory. Let us talk more about this." Paul went in to the marketplace and he engaged these people. It says "Day after day he went where the people were." And he did it in a reasonable way.

Friends, sometimes our message can get lost in our method. Sometimes our passion can get in the way of the message. And man, when we are discussing spiritual things with folks who don't know God, we must see them as a vulnerable lost sheep without a shepherd, not as an opponent to be beaten into submission. Paul turned his inner turmoil into positive action. And it moved him toward people. If we're going to be a church that follows Paul's example, if we are going to be a church for the city, we must also be engaged relationally. Day after day, Paul listened. He learned. He interacted. He shared his opinions as he listened to the opinions of others -- all day, every day. They kicked back and forth ideas. They bantered back. They listened, they shared, they debated. Who was he talking to? Who was he engaging in dialogue? Two different kinds of people. There were the epicureans and there were the stoics. These are big fancy words that we're going to unpack to get today -- because they're still around. These are not old people that only lived in Athens. These people live in Salem. They live in Keizer, they live in Burns -- they're right here. These are just old, fancy words. What's an epicurean? It's a modern-day secular humanist. These were folks who were driven by their pursuit of pleasure. If you've got a desire, indulge it. Their motto in life was, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." For the epicureans, life had no real meaning, because there is no God. There's just impulse. There's lust. There's

passion. And scientific and Curicism explains creation and everything in it. You ever met an epicurean? Yeah, you have. You just didn't know it. And don't call them that, they'll think you're insulting them. Just say "Hi" and be nice.

There's also another group of people called the "stoics." These folks were pantheists. They believed that God was in everything. God didn't create the heavens and the earth -- the heavens and the earth WERE God. And therefore, the creation was to be worshipped. Their life motto, their mantra, was to elevate intellectualism. They were stoic. They were button-down. They had their emotions under control because they ran everything through their intellect. Because that's the way you connect with God. Unfeeling rationalism was the way to connect with the gods. So, the stoics of yesterday are today's new age post-modernists. You think these are people that Paul agreed with? No way! Paul completely was diametrically opposed in his world view. But yet, somehow this man figured out how to build rapport with them. He somehow figured out how to go and engage them without adding fuel to a fire. Day after day, Paul engaged these people, even when they were rude to him. The text says they called him an "idle babblers." Now, that, you know, at face value, isn't a very kind thing to say. "What is this idle babblers have to say?" It is NOTHING like what the Greek actually says. It's way better. You know what they called him? They actually called him a "seed picker." A seed picker! That means nothing to you and I. Do you know how offensive that would have been to Paul? You know what a seed picker was? It was an obtuse simpleton, an empty-headed moron who didn't have a unique thought of his own, but he would go around to other smart people and he would pick at their ideas. He was like a dirty bird, like a dirty crow, just picking at seeds! Oh, that was interesting. That was interesting. And then he would pass off these ideas as if they were his own. He was a plagiarist. An empty-headed plagiarist with no unique thoughts of his own. They called him a seed picker. And you know what Paul did? They called him a name, and it was a rude name! You know what Paul did? Nothing! Nothing! He didn't return an insult for an insult. He didn't say, "Okay, you wanna match wits? I'm actually kinda smart, by the way! I could eviscerate you intellectually." Paul did nothing. He just took it. Seed picker was a pejorative term used to describe someone who couldn't think for themselves. Paul could think for himself. But he just took it. He didn't get defensive. Paul was a brilliant man, but he bit his tongue. He tasted a little bit of blood, and he ignored their offense. Because if he was ever going to have a chance to tell them about Jesus Christ, he had to first show them what Jesus Christ was like. Nobody has ever endured greater injustice than Jesus Christ. No one has ever had to endure the impact of more egregious lies than Jesus Christ. Yet never an impure word crossed His lips.

1 Peter chapter one says that even though Jesus was reviled, He never reviled anyone in return. He never insulted anyone. Paul takes a page right out of Jesus' book and says, "I'm not going to respond." Jesus kept His mouth shut when He was insulted, even when He was hanging on the cross. And Paul let these pagans tell lies about him. Because both Jesus and Paul were deeply committed to pointing people to the one true God, and they knew that their behavior was part of that process. If we want to be a church that engages people relationally, we must ask ourselves, how well do you deal with people that you disagree with? This past year has given us plenty of data to help us answer that question. How well do we engage people that we disagree with? We just spent a year embroiled in nothing but controversy. We've had a raging political debate as Trump has left office and Biden entered. We are still in the midst of a pandemic that has unearthed a spirited debate over how to stem the spread of the virus. We have experienced some public assemblies that, depending on your interpretation, are either deemed peaceful protests or lawless riots. How well do you dialogue with folks you disagree with? Paul disagreed with these people. These people insulted him, and yet he had a long-term goal -- "I'm gonna show these people day after day what Jesus is like. I'm gonna engage them in dialogue so that I might have an opportunity to point them to the one true God, and we're not there yet. I gotta wear it. I gotta wear it. I just gotta eat that insult! I can't let it get to me." Have you ever been insulted? Wooo. It's tough to bite your tongue, isn't it? What if they call you a closed-minded, all right conservative wacko! What if they call you that? Big deal! I mean, they've come up with so many creative names, I mean -- you could think through... um, we used to be called "holy rollers" -- "Jesus freaks" -- "Bible-thumpers" -- there's

nothing new under the sun! If they insult, let them insult. Because if we've got a long-term goal, if our desire is to tell people about Jesus, we must first show them how to respond in the face of insults and lies.

We've got to consider the way Paul reacted by the very people that he was trying to engage in life-changing dialogue. Did Paul leave them? Did he turn on his heel and ditch them? No. He endured their scorn. Did he return insult for insult, or beat them down with a scathing rant? No. He didn't. In fact, look at the way he responded to them. They called him, "idle babblers," they called him, "seed picker," "empty-headed simpleton" -- verse 22, Paul says, when he had a turn to talk, when he got invited actually to the high council, the men in the marketplace brought him to their leadership, Paul had a chance to talk, but he referred to them with the most respectful phrase he could have in that moment. "Men of Athens, I see that you are a religious people." He was kind and he was gentle, because he knew anger would get him nowhere. He knew that if he's ever going to have a shot at telling them about Jesus, he had to show them Jesus -- humility, kindness, gentleness, patience. Conviction. Boldness. Endurance. These are all important attributes. And these traits had to lead in that moment, and in order for those traits to be expressed, Paul had to set aside his pride, didn't he? He wasn't a seed picker. He was a brilliant thinker. But he had to set aside his anger. He had to set aside his defensiveness and his desire to win. And he needed to show them what a transformed life looks like so that one day he'd be able to show them the One who transformed his life. Paul was motivated emotionally. It caused him to get engaged relationally because he had the long game in mind. He was heading somewhere. He needed to gain their respect. He needed to show them that he was trustworthy. And he needed to earn the right to be heard. And in order to do that, he needed to be where the people were, in the marketplace mingling and talking and discussing.

Friends, where is your marketplace? We've got to get the gospel out of this building! We've already heard it! We already know it! Where's your marketplace? Is it the gym that you work out at? Or, used to work out at, sorry! Is it your workplace? I know that many of you are at home. It is harder today than it used to be. It is! But we need a marketplace! We have got to have a place that we are moving toward people relationally and building bridges of dialogue so that we can show them Jesus and ultimately tell them who Jesus is. Where is your marketplace? Paul knew how to engage the culture that he was trying to redeem. We are not going to reshape our culture by condemning it. We're certainly not going to reshape our culture by condoning it, either. Like Paul, we've got to meet people where they're at. We need to understand our culture on their own terms -- even if it makes us uncomfortable. We need to listen to learn, and once we've learned, we can then speak redemptively instead of reactively. Paul spent a considerable amount of time engaging people in dialogue down in the marketplace. He spent a considerable amount of time showing the Athenians his passion for Christ. And then the time came for him to tell them the truth about the one true God. And when that time came, Paul was focused theologically.

Augustine is quoted as saying, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." I don't like that phrase. I don't like it. I get it, I understand it. But you know what that does? That gives people permission to just show. It's called "Show and Tell"! Oh, I'm friendly. I smile a lot. I'm sharing the gospel. Yeah, kinda. But you gotta tell. The time came for Paul to get declarative. The time came for him to say, "Okay. Now it's my turn to talk." Like I said earlier, the people in the marketplace brought Paul to what's called the "Areopagus." The Areopagus would be akin to our Supreme Court. It was their ruling high council. They were the one who made decisions. They would listen to new theories and new philosophies, and they would decide if they were worthy to be upheld, or whether they should be dismissed. It was up at the top of Athens and they brought Paul to the men of the Areopagus and said, "Hey, this guy's talking about some new god. It's really interesting. This god apparently rose from the dead. So, listen to him. Let me know if this guy's out to lunch or if he's got something important to say." Paul does an amazing thing -- absolutely amazing thing. "Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious, respectful. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I found an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' But you worship something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you."

Paul had seen these 30,000 altars and shrines built to false gods, and there was one -- there was one that had an inscription to the unknown god. Why was that there? It was there because the Athenians saw the gods as vindictive and capricious. If you dissed one of the gods and you didn't build an altar for him -- he's gonna getcha. So they hedged their bets, and they put one to just say, "In case we missed anybody -- this one's for you! Okay, don't get mad!" Paul, as he walked around, you know what he didn't do? He didn't take a baseball bat to those shrines. He didn't knock 'em over and decimate them. You know what Paul did? Paul used that one altar to find common ground with these people that he totally disagreed with. He said, "You know that altar right there? I'm so glad you built that altar, because I know that God. You might not know Him, but I do, and I'm gonna tell you all about Him." Paul knew the culture that he was trying to engage. He found common ground with them. He didn't destroy them, he didn't shame them, he didn't try and fight with them -- he found common ground. He even went so far as to quote some of their poets, some of their musicians. He found common ground with these people as he then began -- the rest of the text -- he then points them to the one true God, "the One in whom we live and breathe and have our meaning." He found common ground with a culture that was polytheistic, that was atheistic -- that he didn't agree with, and he had an opportunity to tell them the truth about God. He told them what God is like after he had shown them what God is like. And when he was done, some people laughed at him. The text says, "Some sneered." They mocked him. But some believed. Some believed. He had an impact on his culture. He built bridges for dialogue rather than destroying the altars. Destroying the altars would have burned bridges, but yet, he referred to those altars in order to build bridges for dialogue.

Are we a church for the city? Absolutely. Do we have work to do in order to get better? Of course we do. But we have made some intentional decisions over the past few years to move toward our city in order to create opportunities for us to both show people and tell people about Jesus. It's why we have Upward. It's why we have Skills Camp. It's why we do serve Salem. It's why we take a Christmas offering. It's why we have North Block Ministries. It's why we are supportive of Angel Tree. All of these events give us the opportunity to be around lost people in the hope that we might introduce them to Jesus. Because if you want to be effective telling people about Jesus, you must show them Jesus first. When God wanted to show mankind what He was like, He put on flesh and dwelt among us so that we could see Him. Jesus showed us what the Father was like in the way that He loved people, the way that He served people, and the way that He sacrificed himself for the good of others. Not only did Jesus show us what the Father looked like, He told us everything we need to know in order to have an intimate, life-changing relationship with Him. Show and tell. It's the best way to communicate with people what's most important to you, and if we're going to be a church for the City, let's show people Jesus so that we might have a chance to tell them about Him.

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