

Jesus has given us a mission to go to the ends of the earth and proclaim the Good News. How do we engage people from other cultures who have not heard the name of Jesus Christ? Paul offers us a fine example as he addresses the Athenians in Greece. He began with trial and error and didn't strike gold with his initial efforts prompting the question. "What is this scavenger trying to say?" (Acts 17:18). Eventually, he stirred a little interest of those who wanted to know more but didn't quite get a full understanding. "You bring some strange notions to our ears; we should like to know what these things mean" (17:20).

Paul finds a crowded spot where many gather and begins to make some headway. When Paul preaches at the Areopagus he is at the cultural center of the ancient world. "Paul's discourse appeals to the Greek world's belief in divinity as responsible for the origin and existence of the universe."ⁱ He challenges them to think beyond the common belief in many minor gods. At the same time, he acknowledges that their quest for God is a worthy goal. "The speech reflects sympathy with pagan religiosity, handles the subject of idol worship gently, and appeals for a new examination of divinity, not from the standpoint of creation but from the standpoint of judgment."ⁱⁱ Paul finds a way of connecting the truth of the Gospel with the truth already present in their shrine to "An Unknown God."

Jesus tells us: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Truth is imbedded in every culture and it is our task to search for the points of convergence between our faith and the culture we live in. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. He also inspires holy people of every tribe and tongue to do what is right. We respect elders. This is like the commandment to honor our father and mother. Sharing is a great tradition among the native peoples of Alaska. This can be likened to the commandment prohibiting the coveting of our neighbor's goods. We are called to be generous stewards of what God has entrusted to us and to share generously. As Jesus tells his disciples, "the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth" (16:13).

Sometimes it is easy to make the connections. When I was invited to participate in a weeklong conference in Kotzebue on promoting the culture and language of the region, I listened to the wisdom of the elders and saw how closely it connected with Matthew's Gospel teaching on the Beatitudes. The truth, beauty, and goodness we find in Alaskan Native Cultures so closely matches the truth, beauty, and goodness of the Catholic faith that it is easy to see the same God as the inspiration behind both.

Other times, it is more difficult to see the connections. We live in an imperfect world tainted by sin. Sin obscures our vision. The devil is always busy trying to convince us that what God sets before us is bad. We can easily be deceived by the allurements of this world. With God's help there can be great success in some places and at other times, we will fail to make that connection. In failure, there is always a lesson to be learned that will help us approach the next time with a fresh outlook.

Let us recall the advice of Jesus: "As you enter a house, wish it peace. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; if not, let your peace return to you. Whoever will not receive you or listen to your words—go outside that house or town and shake the dust from your feet" (Lk 10:12-14). Then go on to the next town and try all over again.

ⁱ NAB Note to Acts 17:22-31

ⁱⁱ Ibid