READ THE AUDIENCE
Acts 26:12-18

Living God’s Word—A Walk Through The Bible
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Throughout the 21 years I spent in my previous congregation we often had Luther Seminary students doing what is known as contextual education. This means that they would worship at our church at least a couple times each month; they would experience some of the different ministries we offered.

As their supervisor in this educational process I would meet with them monthly at both a cluster meeting of students and supervising pastors in that area, as well as meeting with them one on one. The purpose was to help them integrate what they were learning in their seminary classes with ministries which actually happen in a church.

One of the classes each Masters of Divinity student was required to take was called, “Reading the Audience.” As part of this class they were required to do a study of their contextual education congregation; to do some analysis of the community and demographics of that church.

This included things like looking at various statistics on the average age of the community and the congregation; the educational level, kinds of jobs, the average incomes in each community household; the kinds of schools, parks and services provided; the potential for new housing, etc.

This process of reading of the audience also included several interviews with people in the congregation, as well as with some random people in the community. Needless to say, their project papers which I reviewed and gave feedback on were often very interesting.

The purpose of this Reading the Audience class, of course, was to help the students understand that pastoral ministry; this ministry of a congregation is always done in the context of the kind of church and community in which they live. Therefore it is very important to know your audience; to know the kinds of people, issues and needs in which one is leading.

Reading the audience is so important for every pastor, as well as for each congregation person as we seek to share the love and truths of Jesus with the whole community. If we don’t know where the people are coming from; if we don’t know what their needs and issues are all about how can we ever witness to them in a way they will hear and understand?

Now the Apostle Paul who we read about in the Book of Acts in our Walk Through The Bible, is a person who appears to have read his audiences very well. Paul knew very well that when addressing different groups of people that he needed to speak to them exactly where they were at; needed to focus on their specific needs.

Something that is very important to realize here is that even though Paul altered his approach depending on who he was speaking to he never, ever, compromised or changed his basic message concerning Jesus. He never altered or toned down his bold proclamation that it is only by turning from one’s past life; only by believing in Jesus is an individual saved.
I need to say that I am deeply concerned today by some Christians and so-called church people who seem to alter their beliefs; seem to twist the message of Jesus depending on what group of people they are with. Some individuals talk openly in church and among their Christian friends about how Jesus, the church and their faith are very important to them. However in groups at work, school, outside the church they use ungodly language and affirm values which are completely contrary to those beliefs.

Some people are like chameleons where they try to blend into and be just like whatever group they are in; they make every effort to try not to offend or make anyone feel uncomfortable. Wanting certain people to like them and not be offended the integrity of their faith is questionable. In other words if we aren’t willing to stand up for Jesus and the truth of God’s Word, in essence we don’t really stand for much at all.

The Apostle Paul said in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” Jesus said in Matthew 10:32, “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.” It is so important that the integrity of our faith and witness are in tact.

In the case of the Apostle Paul, in Acts 13 he faced the audience of Jewish people in the synagogue at Antioch. It was here, in speaking to these people, that Paul recounted and reviewed the history of the Jewish faith from the Old Testament. He clearly explained how this history led to the coming of Jesus; how they needed to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

One truth that came from this is that Paul’s message was received in several different ways. Some who heard him speak that day chose to follow the way of Jesus while others reacted very negatively. In fact, some were so upset that they tried to get the city leaders to stone to death; persecute; run Paul out of town. Things certainly haven’t changed very much for preachers today, have they?

Another audience Paul faced included some intellectuals in Acts 17 who were not Jewish; they were Greeks at Athens. Paul again, who was very much an intellectual, addressed them on their own turf at the Areopagus. He established common ground with these people by affirming that they (acknowledging all the pagan temples around that area) were very religious people.

Paul however then brilliantly bridged to a description of God as the creator and sustainer of life; he pointed out the emptiness of their pagan gods and idols. Then he boldly challenged them to repent and to believe the truth of Jesus. Some mocked him; others wanted to hear more; some believed.

Finally Paul faced an audience which included some high officials in a Roman Court in Acts 26. Here Paul described his religious heritage and mentioned his own previous opposition to Jesus’ followers. Yet he also shared his own life-changing encounter with Jesus; he explained the fundamentals of what it means to believe. Then these rulers sent him on to be dealt with through the Roman judicial process.

The Apostle Paul shows us many examples of how to communicate the Gospel of Jesus with different and various audiences. He shows us that remaining silent and blending in can be a cop-out. His call is that we take advantage of every opportunity we may have to speak up for Jesus.

One of the major dangers of reading the audience, however, is that those of us in the church often think that our church friends; the church group we are part of; the believing community is the audience of today. It is easy to think that those who are members of a church; those who like what we like in the church are the audience we are trying to reach with the Gospel of Jesus.
Yet our church, as well as most any church, doesn’t really represent the ideas and feelings of non-believers in our community; we don’t represent those people who may be living in a different generation or age group than we are. It is true—our frame of reference is usually really very small.

This, of course, has been one of the major problems with our Lutheran church these past years. As a predominately Caucasian, upper-middle class, well-educated, northern European influenced church, we have often had a stuck-up, arrogant attitude; we think our theology, our worship, our way of understanding are right and better than others.

With this thinking there has often then been an attitude that all these others should come up to our level of sophistication. In other words, we have often told the audience that either you come and do it our way or you can lump it. Yet thousands of people are lumping it each year. Our Lutheran church is losing thousands of people each year; our average age is getting older and older.

I remember one time about ten years ago going out for supper with my daughter, Karis, who was then a graduate student at Luther Seminary. She had just returned, as part of her seminary J-term class, from a week-long conference in Phoenix focused on Christian ministry to the younger and post-modern generation. I believe we now refer to the newest young generation as millennials.

As part of our couple hour conversation she challenged me about how many non-Christians I am hanging around these days; how many non-Christians I am learning from and listening to as far as what their needs are; what the church should be doing to reach out to them. I had to admit that I mostly hang around Christian people.

Karis also challenged me as to how much I know about the post-modern (and millennial) generation coming up; how much I know about how we need to be reaching these young people for Jesus today. I heard it said one time by Brian McClaren that those of us 40 years and older are in a whole different world today. Obviously I had to honestly share that I have so much to learn.

Yet both Karis and I talked about our passion and love for young adults, for post-modern people, for millennials who don’t know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We talked about our concern with the predominant church theme of so many that we want our churches to do things the way we like; what makes us comfortable rather than thinking first about those who don’t know Jesus.

So I vowed that night to spend more time with my three adult children talking about this topic, and trying to learn as much as I can about ministry to some generations we are losing very fast. I vowed to try to connect even more to the many twenty-something, and early thirty-something people who are joining and getting involved in the congregations where I have been (and am) a pastor.

It is really exciting, my friends, that Messiah has Charis on our staff along with some younger people and families who are getting involved. Some are plugging into small groups and other ministries. Some are seeking to go deeper in their connections and faith. Each one of us needs to welcome these people into the main stream ministry of our church; to learn as much as we can from them.

My friends, it is so important that we read the audience in our personal lives and in our church; that we speak a clear message of Jesus and of our faith in him to each person. Let us all grow in our Bible knowledge; our faith understanding; our connection to the heart of worship so we can proclaim the truth of Jesus with boldness, intelligence and with care.