ROSE HILL CHURCH

Acts 17:16-34
I Once Was Lost
"Becoming Curious"

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January 18th, 2026

There's a popular character in a series of children's books that have been around since 1941. They've been turned into a PBS Kids television series and even made into a movie or two. This character fits today's theme perfectly. He's a little monkey, and his caretaker is a man with a yellow hat. The familiar sentence about this little monkey is (say it with me if you know it): "George was a good little monkey, and always very _____" (curious!). Trivia question for you all: The man with the yellow hat is never named in the original book series. But later, in the PBS series, he is given a name though it is rarely used. Anyone know his name? Answer: Ted.

George's curiosity led to questions like "I wonder what this does?" "I wonder where this goes?" "What happens if I push this, grab that, or follow this?" And as he explores life through the lens of those curiosity-fueled questions, it almost always leads to messiness and mistakes. George is a fantastic example of a threshold many people pass through on their journey toward Jesus: they develop curiosity. I think this might be the first sermon I've ever preached that has a mascot!

Series Graphic. Last week we talked about the first of five "thresholds" in the book, *I Once Was Lost.* These thresholds reflect people's testimony of how they came to faith. So, they aren't prescriptive; they're descriptive; they are stages that most people go through on a journey to faith. As part of the sermon last week, we had a brief Question and Answer session with Don Everts, one of the co-authors. If you missed last week, I really encourage you to catch up: pick up a free copy of the book in the lobby, read a copy of the sermon from the lobby or our website, or even better, watch it at our YouTube channel so you get the full sermon with the Question and Answer with Don, and start at ground zero in this series.

That first threshold is "trusting a Christian." For most people, that's the initial step toward faith in Jesus: having a relationship of trust with someone who models the faith well.

The second threshold is "developing curiosity." And for most people, this naturally follows and flows out of trust. We see a powerful example of this in our passage this morning from Acts 17:16-34.

For those who don't know or have forgotten: the Book of Acts is all about the birth of the church—a kind of documentary of the early Christian movement. It follows not just the twelve disciples, but others as well: where they went, who they encountered, what they said, and most importantly, how God worked powerfully through them to draw people across the Roman Empire toward faith in Jesus. Let's read **Acts 17:16-34…**

Sermon Graphic. Now, while *I Once Was Lost* focuses on the thresholds non-believers cross in becoming followers of Jesus, what's interesting in this passage is that it's actually *Paul* who initially displays curiosity—curiosity about the idols and gods being worshiped in Athens. And the key insight from both Acts 17 and the corresponding chapter in *I Once Was Lost* is this: **Curiosity in non-believers is often cultivated when Christians are curious themselves.** If we want to lead people toward Jesus, we must first be willing to lean in with our own curiosity.

Verse 16 tells us Paul was "greatly distressed" by the idols in Athens. A lot of people shut down conversation when they feel distressed by someone's beliefs or behavior. They draw conclusions, issue judgments, and disengage without first being curious. They are so certain in their conclusions, that curiosity is killed. Paul does the opposite. **He doesn't let his distress shut down conversation. He leans into it.**

He could have launched into an emotional tirade and said, "How could worship all these idols? Don't you know they're just statues of imaginary gods? What's wrong with you pagan idol-worshippers?" But that approach would only have made his audience defensive. It would have been belittling

and built walls between him and them. Instead of impatient condemnation, Paul chooses patient engagement.

Verse 17 says he reasoned with people daily: in the synagogue and in the marketplace. Some philosophers began interacting with him. **The word translated "debated" is probably better understood as "dialoged.**" That matters, especially to our ears today, because what passes for debate today often isn't dialogue at all. It's typically just people stating opinions, labeling the other side as "wrong" or "extreme," and refusing to listen, and who ever yells loudest or last or both, wins. That's not what is happening here. Paul is exchanging ideas. He's listening. He's engaging in genuine dialogue.

There *is* some mockery—verse 18 tells of people saying, "What is this babbler trying to say?" But Paul doesn't get offended or rattled. He stays in the conversation rather than walking away. **Too many people today—inside and outside the church—walk away the moment they encounter disagreement, even over secondary issues.**

I know pastors who have had congregants leave their churches because the pastor *hinted* at a political view that differed slightly from their own—or because the pastor expressed a nuanced view on a person or issue that some congregants insisted on seeing only in black and white. Despite sharing years and years of Jesus-centered relationship, having the same core theology and doctrine, and overlapping on 80 or 90 percent of other convictions and values, that remaining difference was enough to leave the church without real dialogue. Frequently, instead of being curious, conversing, building on shared ground, and graciously engaging where they disagreed, they walked away. It's heartbreaking, and it happens far too often in our churches.

Paul could have done the same thing here. **The differences between Christianity and the Greek pagan religion were vast, and on core issues—not secondary.** Aside from a shared belief in and seeking of the divine and the spiritual, they were worlds apart. But Paul doesn't disengage. He models genuine dialogue even in the face of deep disagreement. And like Curious George, Paul gets curious. Verse 23 tells us he carefully examined their

objects of worship as he had been walking around the city. He didn't judge them from a distance; he took time to learn about them. That curiosity opened the door to meaningful dialogue. This principal could be transformational in our world today if more people practiced it.

Paul recognizes these people searching for spiritual answers. They may have come to the wrong conclusions, but they're asking the right questions. And because he treated them with respect rather than rejection, they want to hear what he has to say.

Paul is given the opportunity to share the gospel because they became curious about him and his beliefs—and that curiosity was sparked, at least in part, because he was curious about them. We see in all this the messy part about this threshold. Curiosity isn't neat and predictable. *Judgment* is. *Condemnation* is. But curiosity is *risky*. It is *messy*. **Curiosity means brushing up against beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors that are often in conflict with our own.** So: many believers keep other people and their beliefs at arm's length. And when we aren't curious about them, they're rarely curious about us—or about Jesus.

Have you ever wondered why more of our non-believing friends don't ask about our faith? It may be because we haven't shown much curiosity about their lives beyond the surface. Or perhaps they aren't curious about our faith because our faith doesn't stand out enough to provoke questions.

In the chapter for this week on this topic, Don Everts tells a story about intentionally moving into a struggling neighborhood in Denver—it's an area dealing with crime and economic hardship. The move was deeply countercultural (most people want to move to a nicer neighborhood than where they live, not the opposite) and his move was motivated by his faith. It sparked curiosity in a friend who couldn't understand why Don would choose to live there. It got his attention. That curiosity opened the door to ongoing spiritual conversations.

Even in Paul's presentation of the gospel, there is space for curiosity. Look at verse 27: **"God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him…" (Acts 17:27).** That phrase, "perhaps reach out for him" is more literally translated, "perhaps they might feel their way toward him." It conveys reaching out in the dark, uncertain and tentative, but moving forward nonetheless. God makes room for that process. Curiosity is not opposed to faith; it's often the pathway into it.

Jesus models this as well. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be open to you." Curiosity is encouraged: Ask, Seek, Knock. Jesus frequently asks questions that encourage curiosity and seeking. For instance, in John 1, he asks a couple people, "What are you seeking?" Later (in Mark 10) Jesus asks a blind man named Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" In Luke 10 Jesus responds to a question about the Old Testament Law with his own question, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"

He responds to questions with questions because he wants to know what people already think and believe. Jesus was curious! **Asking questions invites and encourages curiosity and treats curiosity as part of the relationship—not as a rebellion or a danger.** In fact, the ones who usually are critiqued by Jesus most harshly are not curious outsiders, but Jewish religious leaders who have their faith in a nice, neat box and are certain, closed off, and unwilling to engage.

Now, we do have to be careful. This isn't a manipulative tactic. We aren't faking curiosity in others or a faith that provokes curiosity to bait people into spiritual conversations. That would destroy trust, what we talked last week about building. This is about genuine curiosity and lived faith in the context of real relationships.

And this threshold can take time. This is something Don Everts and Doug Schaupp emphasize in the third chapter of their book. I'm glad they do because I think that's one thing missing from the passage in Acts, and is often overlooked in the gospels, too. All of Scripture, really. "Time" is greatly

compressed in Scripture (Israelites in the desert for 40 years, Jesus' life, Paul's time in Athens, etc.). Things appear to move more quickly than they actually did. And it's easy to think, therefore, that our friends ought to come to faith in Jesus in a week's time. But that's just not how it usually works. **So, as we live distinctive lives of faith and show genuine interest and curiosity about others, their own curiosity about Jesus can grow.** It's about relationships—and those simply take time and effort.

In Acts 17, at the end of our reading today, some people respond to Paul's message with faith. Others don't. That's the messiness of curiosity. Like Curious George, you never quite know where it will lead.

But the man in the yellow hat is always there—guiding, welcoming, and protecting. He doesn't discourage George's curiosity; he creates a safe space for it. And while he's never the star of the show, he faithfully nurtures George along the way. In some ways, we might say he's a bit of a Christ-like figure. Jesus guides, welcomes, and protects just like the man in the yellow hat—though Jesus is certainly the star of the show; our faith hinges on his life, death, and resurrection.

But in another sense, *we* are also like the man in the yellow hat. Given the Biblical metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ, this shouldn't surprise us. Tony Campolo used to say that we Christians are "Jesus with skin on." **We Jesus-followers are sent into the world to be trusted guides—people who create safe spaces for honest questions, spiritual searching, and real dialogue, without making ourselves the focus.**

So, two applications of this. First, if you're not sure about Jesus, I want to encourage curiosity. Rose Hill is a safe place where "Spiritual curious Georges" are welcome and can come with their questions about the Christian faith. Second, for those of us who are already believers, let's encourage curiosity about Jesus in these two ways: by *being* curious about the people God puts in our lives, and *living our faith* in a curiosity-provoking way. Jesus taught this and modeled it. Paul practiced it. And when we do the same, we can help lead people toward Jesus. Let's pray…Amen.