

When life finds you in a dumpster... what do you do? An acquaintance of mine, Luke van den Langenberg, only bought dairy and alcohol in college. The rest of his groceries he scrounged from grocery store dumpsters.

His reputation was worthy of a 2016 article in the Madison news site the Isthmus, the opening paragraph reads, “It’s evening when Luke van den Langenberg drives his old Toyota to the dimly lit parking lot of a chain grocery store on the west side. He pulls up to a dumpster, and his friend Aaron Conradt jumps out of the car. Conradt peers lovingly into the dark bin and then jumps inside. van den Langenberg hovers next to the dumpster as Conradt brings up produce for him to inspect. “Dude, take all the garlic,” says van den Langenberg. “I made garlic chicken from the dumpster once.””

When life finds you in a dumpster... what do you do? **“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”**

Now, if you’re a respectable Jew in the 1st century, you would avoid such association with the Gentiles. Perhaps the idea of my friend Luke dumpster diving makes you squeamish, but that’s how any Jew in that time would feel about hanging out in such a pagan city. One group of Jews in the first century, the Essenes, even left society so they could avoid intermingling with the Gentiles and their worship of false gods.

Before Paul arrived at Athens, he was in a region of Greece called Berea with two of his compatriots, Silas and Timothy. Just earlier in the chapter we read, **“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”** Unfortunately, Jews from Thessalonica followed Paul to Berea and forced him to flee to Athens. Paul went ahead to Athens while Timothy and Silas continued the work of the ministry in Berea.

Now, after such a stressful encounter in Berea, Paul could have just laid low. Found a room at an inn and went along to get along. He was just waiting for Silas and Timothy. But that’s not what he did.

Because the Holy Spirit stirred up Paul at the sight of so many idols, **“He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.”**

Paul knew that every day was an opportunity for the Gospel. He always was **“making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”** The Holy Spirit that is provoked within us at the sight of sin and evil in this world, let Him speak. In eternity, people aren’t going to remember how good you were at walking on eggshells. They might remember you for telling them what they needed to hear, even if it was hard to stomach.

Our first point from Paul’s trip to Athens: When life finds you in a dumpster... 3. Turn on your flashlight and start digging.

In the same 2016 Isthmus article, van den Langenberg’s friend Aaron Conradt is quoted as saying, “He’s hands-down the most dumpster-friendly person I’ve ever met. His idea of the ‘trash’ is like a bin of opportunity, and he’s not afraid to get his hands dirty.” In 2016, Luke reported gathering over \$200 in groceries a week.

How does Paul’s preaching in Athens go? **“Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babblers wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”**

I want to focus on the word babblers. I don’t think the English quite captures what the philosophers were accusing Paul of. It is literally translated as seed logic. The metaphor this conjures up is that of a bird who scavenges all sorts of garbage to make a nest. They’re calling Paul somebody who is cobbling together scraps of arguments. It’s the same as if someone talked to me and said, “I never took a seminary class, but I’m an expert in theology because I have overheard a lot of conversations in the seminary cafeteria!” To put it in modern terms, they were calling Paul a dumpster diver.

For a dumpster diver like van den Langenberg in search of a meal, the odds are good, but the goods are odd. Try making a meal plan from scavenged food!

But the irony of that accusation of Paul is this: who is the dumpster diver, and who is the treasure hidden in the trash? What the Greek philosophers didn’t realize was that *they* were the treasure that was worth Paul getting his hands dirty.

Paul speaks before the Areopagus and has a chance to share the Gospel with the people of Athens. He leans into the fact that the Greeks have many gods, and he proclaims to them the God of the Bible—the only God there is.

He said that all men were made “...**that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,**” In a nice way. Paul implies that they are the dumpster divers. They are the ones sorting through trash philosophies and worldviews to find diamonds in the rough, but the problem is they’re blind. Imagine scrounging for edible food in a dumpster and being blind!

As Paul continues his sermon, he actually quotes two Greek poets. People like van den Langenberg scrounge for value in dumpsters. Paul, this babblers, this scavenger, scrounged through volumes of Greek philosophy to find two gems, two lines that because they are in the Bible, are the inspired Word of God!

We ultimately remember Jesus who is in the redemption business. He came to this Earth not to live an easy life, but a tough one. He got his hands dirty. He

dumpster dove, so to speak, not for a good meal, but He came to the dregs of society to redeem them: tax collectors, sinners, and Gentiles.

He took on your trash: your sins, your sorrows, your pains. He took them to the cross. He redeemed you on your worst day when you were down in the dumps, and has a plan for you. He rose again and shows you that you have hope. So too, there's people in our lives who are treasures right in front of us, people who need to hear about Jesus, even if they seem like an unlikely convert.

Our second point from Paul's trip to Athens: when life finds you in a dumpster... 2. Remember just because it's in the garbage doesn't mean it's garbage.

On this mother's day, we can be thankful to our mothers who have shown us the love of God by caring for us and loving us even when we felt like garbage. More than just cleaning up messes, God gave us the gift of mothers to make houses a home and to give us comfort when we have felt without hope.

The Isthmus article concludes, "It's a hard balance because there is a lot of cool stuff to find in the trash, but I don't want people throwing this stuff away at all," van den Langenberg says. "I will be happy when there is a day that I can't dumpster dive. There's so much economic value in this stuff."

Paul calls the people at the Areopagus to repent "**because [God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.**" At the mention of the resurrection of the dead some mocked, but others wanted to hear more.

In this world, we are not unlike the contents of a dumpster. Jesus Himself uses the analogy of wheat vs. tares, sheep vs. goats, and good fish vs. bad fish. When He comes again, those who denied Him will be sent to Hell, but those who believe in Him will be resurrected to life eternal.

Even as we keep digging as we share the Gospel with others, we know a day is coming when not a single treasure will be thrown out into the dumpster. The Lord knows those who are His and He knew from before the foundation of the world. We as Christians await that day when "**The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace... Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.**" Trash day is tomorrow, the garbage truck is soon to come. Christ sends His Church to gather those He has redeemed.

Our third point from Paul's trip to Athens: when life finds you in a dumpster... 1. Keep waiting for your rescue. All this to conclude: **BECAUSE JESUS DUMPSTER DOVE FOR YOU, YOU GLADLY LOOK FOR THE FAITHFUL IN UNLIKELY PLACES.**