



Roanoke, Virginia

October 25, 2020

“The Community That Refuses to Break”

Part VI of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”

Acts 15:1-21

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I do not have the preaching chops to explain how significant is our passage from Acts 15. As far as the New Testament goes, stories of Jesus’ life or the parables he tells are more familiar than this story of a council meeting held in Jerusalem. But what happens at this meeting shapes the whole future of the church. That the Christian Church today includes people of all colors and nationalities begins here.

That is the historical significance of this meeting. What this meeting also speaks to is a universal human experience; the tension that comes when separate cultures try to co-exist.

Our passage looks at this tension and does so from the perspective of the culture that has the upper hand.

Think of West Germany after the Berlin Wall comes down. Does this strong country with a thriving economy accept a merger with East Germany which had evolved in such a different and weaker direction in the 46 years since the war ended?

Think of white southern leaders in business, politics and social life after the Civil War ended. How are they going to deal with newly freed slaves? Integrate or segregate, welcome or oppose, invite into homes and clubs or post signs indicating where people belong? Think of

- A majority party considering a minority party in passing legislation,
- Israel considering Palestinians,
- a socially conservative and happy family considering how to relate to a relative or family member who they learn is gay,



- an affluent church with homeless visitors.

In each case, a logically coherent and time-tested way of seeing and being is confronted with a radically *different* way of being. What do you do? Fight? Stay out of each other's way? Compromise? Accommodate?

It is to these challenges that our passage speaks. When I read the minutes of a meeting held in Jerusalem you'll hear how the answer is not obvious, that there is validity in both holding firm and giving way, and that often the best resolution does not come because of manuals but because of ears and hearts. Listen as I read the minutes and listen for the Word of God.

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

¹² The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ 'After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,

¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.'



¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

The minutes go on to tell of a letter the council agrees to send to Gentile followers of Jesus to explain decisions and make requests. I'll get to those later.

The Word of the Lord! (*Thanks be to God!*)

“I want to be in the room where it happens,” sings Aaron Burr in the musical *Hamilton*. Well, if we could go back in time, I think we would all like to be in this room in Jerusalem where history altering decisions are made.

One bonus is that there would be celebrity sightings. The original disciples would be there, those who still are alive. Only they might look different than we imagine. The average life span is about 35 years old and the disciples are at least that age given that the Jerusalem Council takes place 15 to 25 years after the crucifixion. Even taking into account the high infant mortality rate which brings the average down, these disciples are at the age when they understandably might care about the legacy they will leave behind.

And here's another thing. Sometimes—not always, but sometimes—older people get set in their ways. Yes, these Jewish disciples have been leading a new movement, but they are quite happy within their Jewish faith and understandably would like to share the blessings of their faith with others. Who could blame them if they would like to keep some things—important and meaningful things—from changing?

They might feel this way especially because things have changed so much already. The word “church” has not yet been used, and certainly there is not yet a separate, organized religion called “Christianity,” but the numbers of those who want to join others in following Jesus is exploding. The growth has been a historical miracle. This is not a protest movement inspired by a martyrdom. Yes, Jewish and Roman leaders colluded to have Jesus crucified, but this movement does not have revenge as its motive or the overthrow of a reigning power as its goal.

But make no mistake: it *is* a liberation movement. They seek spiritual liberation of souls from sin and moral liberation for the poor and oppressed. They are unimpressed now by all the silly claims made by King Herod and recent Roman Emperors that they are gods. They will pay their taxes, but their devotion is to Jesus and their joy comes in the sharing of resources within the community so that everyone's needs are met. In fact, they are famous for making sure that everyone in their community is taken care of.

It is a beautiful moment in history. There is much to praise and preserve.

But I need to be careful not to *over-sell* this beautiful moment, because it is not a perfect moment. (What moment of human history ever is?) It turns out that what is beautiful can be hard. Realistically—practically—how do you live the beautiful vision that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free?



Answering that questions is what is on the agenda for this meeting in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas have been border-crossing missionaries. They have gone to Gentile places like Iconium, Pisidia, Lystra and Antioch. So far, they have gone to synagogues in these Gentile towns and cities to speak to Jews, but Gentile locals listen in and they want to know more. Paul and Barnabas don't hold back, but witness to them, too. And many Gentiles are converted. They want to be followers of Jesus, too.

Some *Jewish* followers of Jesus don't know how to deal with this. A minister friend of mine accepted a call at church. Excitement spread about this new minister and attendance grew. The sanctuary began to be packed on Sundays. He was shocked one Sunday to learn that one of his older and most devout members was standing at the entrance of the parking lot asking visitors to please go find another church because this one had enough new members.

Well, some devout and loyal Jewish Christians actually follow behind Paul and Barnabas and try to do something of the same. They go to the Gentile converts basically saying, “**We don't need Gentiles to follow Jesus. We need Jews. So, yes you can follow Jesus, but you need to first convert.**”

This doesn't go down well with Paul and Barnabas and it certainly does not go down well with Gentile converts. The tricky thing about God's unconditional love is that you end up believing that God loves you for who you are. Why be told that and then be told to become something you are not?

So, the meeting is called and Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem.

Now I think I've just given away that the leaders in Jerusalem are going to end up making accommodation. That's true but jumping to that conclusion is not being fair to where the Jewish Christians are coming from. In fact, I identify with the Pharisees who speak out more than anyone else in the room... and certainly more than the recent Gentile converts.

That might sound odd, because I am a Gentile. I am a descendent of Scots, Irish and English. I'm so pale a Gentile that I put on sunscreen like it's liquid clothing. But I am not talking about *details*, I am talking about *type*. I am talking about being the *kind* of person who loves tradition, who loves the faith I have inherited, who loves the churches I have been a part of because those churches loved me. By personality, I am not someone who automatically thinks something new is something better, or who thinks every new trend is a step forward and not a step back.

No, in personality I am more like the Pharisees in that room. Yes, historically, there were graceless, overly legalistic Pharisees who gave Jesus fits just like there are some graceless, Calvinistic, Presbyterians today. But historians tell us that the Pharisees in this room in Jerusalem are among the thousands who are early followers of Jesus. And they do so because they care about what I care about.

- They love their scriptures and love how Jesus taught them, as do I.
- They see Jesus as the revelation of the God of Creation, the fulfillment of the Law of the Ten Commandments, and the one foretold by the prophets, as do I.



- They see Jesus as being the Shepherd King who puts the interests of his people before his own, as do I.
- They see all people being called to a direct relationship to God, and see Jesus as the one who has given them a way to have a personal relationship with God, as do I.

Do you hear me? I am not saying that I identify with those Pharisees as Jews, but I identify with their wanting to protect what has nurtured and shaped them as people of faith. I love how I came to faith as an Anderson and a Presbyterian. I love the way Second Presbyterian Church has figured out how to be the church. In my family ways and church ways I have experienced ways to honor God.

So, I can understand these Pharisees, who are Jews who have come to know Jesus, want these Gentiles to become Jews so they can come to know Jesus as they have.

- Wouldn't the Lord's Supper be so much more meaningful if you know what a Seder Feast is all about?
- Those Gentiles know about kings. But what if they knew how Jews have been looking for a "Messiah," and what they mean by that?
- To celebrate Jesus as God, wouldn't it be wonderful if they took part in the Jewish celebrations of God?

I get it. I think it would be wonderful if others could come to an Anderson family reunion and experience one of our family traditions like our evening of music... *Or*, be in my church where we read the names of loved ones lost on All Saints Sunday, have children wave palms on Palm Sunday or portray biblical characters on Christmas Eve, or when we have a picnic outside on the first Sunday of June. We have gotten to know God in those times. It has shaped who we are.

Just so, through the ages,

- Christians have wanted people of other faiths to be Christian,
- Roman Catholics have wanted Christians to be Catholic,
- Protestants have wanted Christians to be Protestant,
- Baptists have wanted Christians to be Baptist,
- and as a kid I certainly thought all Christians should be Presbyterian.

There have been more than a few along the way who went so far as to say that if you didn't become what they were, you were headed straight to Hell.

Of course, that is going too far, but I understand the spirit of those who want others to come to know Jesus the way they have come to know Jesus.

But funny thing, people who are attracted to Jesus and want to be like him, don't all *want to be like me*. Imagine that. Why wouldn't everyone want to be someone who reads commentaries, doesn't understand labyrinths, dresses up for church, attends every single Christmas Eve service, and vacations with other ministers?



But, everybody who loves Jesus doesn't love to do all that. And these early Gentiles who want to be like Jesus don't all want to be like Jews. When they heard Paul and Barnabas witness to the Gospel of grace, they felt liberated. To come to know a God

- where sins can be forgiven,
- where compassion is power,
- and where reconciliation with enemies is a possibility,

has given them a vision of the world as it is meant to be, and of where it can be when justice is known and mercy is shown.

And, they believe that Jesus can help them *become their best Gentile selves*. Many love so much of what it means to be Gentile. They love their shellfish and their meat medium rare. They love their families and want to see them when they gather for Gentile holidays. And some Roman citizens want to remain Roman citizens because they don't want to surrender its privileges, perks or rights.

So, here in the room there is this tension between two cultures within one movement. Do they hold together, or will they break apart?

I wish all church stories end as well as this one does, but this community *refuses to break*. As I said before, it is a beautiful moment. By beautiful I don't mean pure, spotless or pristine, because what happens is nitty-gritty, human, imperfect, involving compromise on both sides. But messy can be beautiful when we remember to *celebrate* what is possible rather than *wait* for what is ideal. What is especially beautiful is that those who have the upper hand surrender the most (*that* does not always happen). The majority in the room listen to the voices of the minority. They listen to the stories Paul and Barnabas tell about the Holy Spirit coming into Gentile lives and they recognize in those stories the work of the very same Holy Spirit that first spoke to their own hearts and lives and claimed them. And because they see the Holy Spirit moving, they decide not to stand in the way.

This *does not mean* they surrender everything. In fact, they have some conditions. So that *they* can move forward, they insist on some things that they see are critical at that moment in time. For instance,

- Yes, the Gentiles can keep a Gentile diet, but please, please, please refrain from eating meat with blood in it—especially in front of other Jews—and certainly not meat dedicated to other gods at those Gentile holidays that they still want to attend with their families.
- The Gentiles don't have to keep all those holiness rules that are in place to keep Jews Jewish, but they simply must keep those ethical commands that are about being moral—those critical commands like
 - not lying,
 - not cheating customers,
 - not breaking up families,
 - doing justice,



- showing compassion.
- Also, this movement is about taking care of people, so they ask the Gentiles to help out with mission work and send an offering for the poor in crowded Jerusalem.

Finally, they recognize that churches in Jerusalem and churches in faraway Gentile places are going to be different. They charge Paul and Barnabas to focus on those Gentile churches that are going to look Gentile while they focus on Jerusalem churches that are going to look Jewish. But they will remain one movement.

The solution is not perfect, but it is a beautiful miracle. I am of the school of *Christian Realism* that celebrates the imperfect when there is evidence that the Holy Spirit is working in spite of human limitations.

What I really see and celebrate here is love. The Jews in Jerusalem somehow found it within themselves not “to settle for the love of their own people but surrender to a love that creates people.”¹ That’s a great way to describe the work of the Holy Spirit. God’s love sees and claims us as we are... liberating us to love others as they are... and making way for the possibility that we might become something beautiful together.

May our church and may our nation remember to do the same.

¹ Paraphrased from *Acts, A Theological Commentary*, WJK, 2017, p. 148.

