

Acts 15

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Scripture

5 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."

Sermon

Today's story is another story of how God, through the Holy Spirit, was at work in the lives of the early followers of Jesus, and their world, following Jesus' death. What we have seen so far in these stories is that God is always way ahead of people when it comes to imagining a world in which everyone belongs and a world where everyone has what they need to become who they were created to be.

These early followers of Jesus were Jewish. The ideas and decisions they were wrestling with had to do with what it meant to be Jewish and whether new believers had to first be Jewish (follow Jewish law) before they could be part of these new communities of Jesus followers. This story reminds us that the Christian tradition is rooted in tradition. Even in those first communities of Jesus followers, staying within received

traditions was important and sometimes that made things tense. One example of this tension is in today's text and deals with the Jewish law requiring the circumcision of all males. In the Jewish tradition, circumcision was a physical mark of the covenant between God and God's people. It was an important identity marker. In the same way we talked last week about baptism being a way in which Christians are claimed by God, circumcision is the way in which Jewish males are claimed by God, "You will be my people and I will be your God."

After Stephen's death, which caused followers of Jesus to leave Jerusalem to avoid persecution, many, many people began to hear the stories of Jesus. All the people who heard these stories were not Jewish first, some were Gentiles. Some of the people telling the stories of Jesus told new believers that men who wanted to follow Jesus had to be circumcised, others telling the stories told the people circumcision was not necessary. You can imagine that grown men were not eager to be circumcised if they didn't absolutely have to. All of this was confusing to everyone.

So, Paul, Barnabas, and some others were sent to Jerusalem where Peter, James, and the other disciples who had actually hung out with Jesus were along with other Jewish leaders. On their way to Jerusalem, the men had some amazing experiences as they encountered more and more Gentiles who wanted to follow the ways of Jesus. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed. They told the Jesus followers there about what they had seen and heard from these new Gentile followers. And of course, some people in Jerusalem were not jazzed about what they were saying, the Pharisees, for example. The Pharisees were probably some of the same people who had given Jesus a hard time but had since changed their minds and decided maybe Jesus was right after all. That statement makes it seem like they just changed their minds one day and that was that. It was a process. If you

have ever had a major theological shift of your own, you know it is work. They had changed a lot.

But this, not requiring circumcision, was a bridge too far. I can kind of relate to the Pharisees in this story. Maybe you can too. The pandemic has forced all of us to change, to change our social lives, our family holidays, our worship, our work. At some point, enough is enough, right? Change is good, but even the best changers among us need a chance to recover and get used to the new “normal.” I think the problem for the Pharisees was they were just getting used to being Jesus followers, Jewish tradition was important to them. They had no interest in not being Jewish. This was just too much. Circumcision went all the way back to Abraham. It told them who they were in relationship to God. No, they weren’t willing to change that.

This story has me thinking. In this congregation of free-thinkers, who value inclusion and openness, are there rules or traditions that, when confronted with reasons to change them, would cause us to hit the brakes and say, “No, we can’t go there. This is the way we’ve always done it.” Are there things that are so much a part of our identity that, if we changed them, we wouldn’t be who we are anymore? Whatever those things might be for you, and however the thought of changing those things makes you feel, that is how the Pharisees were feeling.

The apostles and elders met to talk about this and in that meeting, Peter reminded them that God was at work in these new Gentile believers, no doubt recalling his own sermon to the Gentiles in chapter 10, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who had heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles...” The inclusion of the Gentiles, this desire to continue to expand God’s kin-dom, was not inspired by people, it was inspired by God. These communities of believers would be formed and

nurtured by God at work in the world, not by rituals or traditions that tend to keep people on the outside.

Peter wasn't the only one telling stories that day. Paul and Barnabas were too and while they talked, the rest of the assembly was silent. They were telling stories about the people they had met on their way to Jerusalem, the Gentiles who had experienced God's presence and whose lives were different. "What could God possibly be up to with these signs and wonders?" they imagined. After the leaders met and Paul and Barnabas spoke, James spoke, using the words of the prophet, Amos,

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.'

To the ears of the author's original audience, in the wake of the temple's destruction in 70 CE, they would have heard the promise of God's restoration of Jerusalem. In the context of the story, this prophecy reminds us that God uses people, all kinds of people, to rebuild, to rebuild cities...and churches.

This text does not teach us there is something wrong with circumcision or with the other 612 Jewish laws in the Bible. This story is not meant to be a criticism of Jewish tradition. It is meant to encourage us to see that God is always doing something new and to imagine that maybe the something new God is doing is calling us to may include people who are not here yet. It occurs to me that maybe this really isn't anything new for God after all. Maybe God is doing what God has always done: showing mercy, drawing the circle wider, imagining a world where

nobody is on the outside. Have you seen the yard signs in our community that say, "Love God, Love Others?" I know they mean well. Our across the street neighbor has one. I want a sign that says, "There are no others."

Maybe being in community together, with people who believe all different things, who are less interested in rituals, traditions, and customs, and more interested in hospitality and loving and caring for each other and the world is what God is calling us to. Maybe God's message to us is that when we expand our welcome, when we make God and community more accessible to other people, even when we have to give up some of our customs and traditions, the future becomes more and not less. We end up with more perspectives, more ideas, more laughter, more joy, more wisdom, more grace, and more love. But we have to let go first.

This story came along at a really good time in the life of our church. In 3 weeks, we will be worshipping in the sanctuary again. And as much as I enjoy worshipping outside, I am excited about being in that space again, with all of you. And I look forward to sharing it with all of you online as well. But when we begin worshipping inside again, it will not be "the way we've always done it." The room may be arranged differently. The order of worship may change. We've already changed how we participate in communion. Things will be different because we want to be sure the online worshipers feel welcome and included. But I want us to remember that, when we let go of the things we are holding on to, our hands are free to reach for something else. I promise, the future will be more and not less. Amen.