

Sermon Series "Acts" - The Council of Jerusalem
Acts 15:1-11 / Acts 15:1-41
Colebrook Congregational Church
July 30, 2017 / Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Today in my series on the Book of Acts, we have the Council of Jerusalem and the interlude to set the scene for the rest of the Book.

The Council of Jerusalem was called when people from Judea arrived at the Antioch Church and immediately started demanding that all the men undergo a certain procedure or else they could not be truly saved. Paul & Barnabas did not take this very well, so they went to Jerusalem to discuss this with the Apostles & Elders. The Council was held to discuss this and other issues concerning the Gentile conversions. A decision was made and a letter of exhortation was sent out to all Churches. After that was all dealt with, Paul decided to make another missionary journey, but there was disagreement with Barnabas, so we see a realignment of people, that continues for the rest of Acts.

The main point of this story is the role of tradition verses God's unifying will.

The story starts in Antioch. Paul & Barnabas have returned from the First Missionary Journey and have made their report to the Church in Antioch. Well, their report apparently caused an issue in Judea, which provoked some protest. It is a long-standing Jewish tradition that circumcision is central to the identity of the covenant people. Paul considers that rite a more spiritual state than a literal cut, as has been the case for many in the Diaspora community in their practices with their proselytes. This was upsetting the more traditional members of the congregation. They saw it as apostasy stemming from the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament. For Paul, it was more a matter of the heart than that of the flesh.

In the previous council, from when Peter converted the Centurion Cornelius back in chapter 11, it gave it's tacit approval, so in effect, this group of interlopers was a bunch of rigorists who acted without the sanction of the Jerusalem Church, and they insinuated themselves into the Antiochene Church, causing no small dissension and debate. So, the Antioch Church sent a delegation to Jerusalem to deal with their members.

Paul & Barnabas go, and they are welcomed warmly by the Jerusalem Church. They gave them their report of all that God had done through them. However, that group of rigorists, made up of Pharisees, insisted that circumcision was still necessary.

So, the Apostles and the Elders met to discuss the matter. James, the Brother of Jesus, now leads the Church in Jerusalem. James Zebedee was martyred and not replaced, and Peter doesn't live in Jerusalem anymore. Now, someone can only be considered an "apostle" if they met Jesus in person; and when they replaced Judas, it was with someone who met that qualification. Luke does not consider Paul to be an apostle, even though Paul claimed to be one, because Jesus appeared to him on the road during his conversion experience, and the Church has accepted that.

Peter suddenly makes a dramatic entrance and delivers a speech. This matter doesn't only affect Paul's legacy & work, but Peter's as well. Peter's testimony is very similar to the arguments that Paul makes in his letter to the Romans: How God has chosen the Gentiles to also receive the Good News; God's investigation of the human heart without partiality and only according to the person's faith; and the impossibility of carrying out all that the Law demands, contrasted with God's Grace. Peter also confirms again that the Gentiles have received the Holy Spirit.

Peter asks the rhetorical question: "Why are you putting God to the test?" This calls the Council back to the task at hand. Should male Gentile converts undergo a very painful procedure? The identity of the disciple, whether Jew or Gentile, must be predicated on grounds other than Torah purity. It must be seen in the work of the Holy Spirit on the believer's heart, enabling new life in a transformed manner.

Peter's conclusion addresses the purity of a Jewish social identity within an inclusive faith community. If Torah purity demands utter blamelessness and this state is impossible to attain, the Pharisee's concern is misplaced, even if it is sincere. They trust in a faithful God for salvation through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Next, Paul & Barnabas offered their testimony to the Council, describing the consummation of Peter's work and the Gentile Pentecost with the work of Paul & Barnabas among the Gentiles.

James then gives his verdict. He saw that the combined testimonies confirmed God's intention and his discernment is decisive in settling the present conflict.

Now, while the Council is about to set a precedent, it is careful to make sure that it agrees with the words of the Prophets. James mostly cites from Amos, mostly from the Greek version, or Septuagint, Chapter 9 Verses 11-12, with bits from Jeremiah and Isaiah.

James then extends the scope of the question they were considering and its decision, anticipating issues when the two types of Christians intermix. The real concern of the Jewish Christians is about certain practices linked to pagan temples, so James exhorts the Gentile converts to abstain from them. James, while freeing Gentiles from Jewish Proselytism, is asking them to embrace the “rules of polite society” found in Leviticus 17-18, especially when in mixed company.

James says that he doesn't want to “trouble” the Gentiles, and the Greek word used that was translated as “trouble” denotes pestering someone against their will, and while he doesn't want to do that, he doesn't want to give the Gentiles carte blanche, so he wrote a letter of exhortation.

It was written, recounting the decision and exhorted the believers to follow some guidelines. Judas Barabbas and Silas were chosen to deliver it to Antioch, followed by the other churches. Silas will appear again. They, along with Paul & Barnabas go to Antioch and stay there.

Chapter 15 ends with a realignment of missionaries. Paul went to Barnabas to suggest that they return to the cities where they set up churches in, to see how they're doing. Barnabas wanted to bring John Mark, the one that is considered to be the writer of the Gospel of Mark, with them. However, Paul did not want to do so, because John Mark had abandoned them during the First Missionary Journey. They had a sharp disagreement.

Barnabas was the one who supported Paul when he converted when no one else would trust him, he was the one who chose Paul to help at the Antioch Church, then there was the missionary journey together, and then the testimony given. A very successful team here is splitting up. Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus, and Paul joined Silas in Syria.

Now, Luke is writing Acts a generation after these events, and is offered as a history. Starting with this chapter, we can start correlating Luke's historical and scholarly account with Paul's Letters as primary sources.

Acts 15 correlates with Paul's Letter to the Galatians Chapter 2. In the Letter, Paul is very angry, to the point of a mangled syntax, and he is trying to walk a tightrope, claiming an endorsement from the apostles of the Jerusalem Church without conceding undue authority to them, maintaining his own independence. There are discrepancies between the two accounts. Paul claimed more responsibility and participation; and also Paul seems unaware of the Council's Letter in Galatians, but then does in the later letters of I Corinthians and Romans. So, Luke may have just retrojected the Letter to that time.

Another difference has Peter in Antioch after the Council, and he & Paul argued over sharing meals at the same table as Gentiles. Barnabas is described as taking Peter's side, and this was the reason given for Paul & Barnabas' separation.

These discrepancies do not change the message or the outcome. The Letter was written, maybe not exactly when Luke says it was. The leadership of the early church may not have been as harmonious as Luke described, nor as catty as Paul described. Luke is looking back as a scholarly historian and Paul is in the thick of it.

None of that changes the consensus of the early church concerning the Gentile Mission. It was decided that the aspects of traditions that would prevent the spread of the Gospel should be reconsidered, like the physical modification of one's body in a way that most would balk at undergoing as an adult; and anything that would cause discord among the diverse community should be discouraged, as those pagan practices that concerned those who chose to observe kosher.

The bigger picture was their commission from Jesus Christ to spread the Good News. The early church realized that, maybe not all at once, but they got there. They realized that they could not just keep doing things they way they always knew, because that it is how it was always done. That attitude can stymie growth, and that is what we can take away from this story. Whatever the situation, if something prevents growth or causes disunity, a new course must be set.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

O God, Your Good News can bring people together in Love, a Divine Love, Your Love, that should never be hindered, or used to create division or disharmony; and we pray that Your Spirit to give us the strength to help Your Love grow & spread. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Loving God, We ask for the gift of Your Holy Spirit to help us pray as we ought, offering up to You our thanks and prayers for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for each breath we take; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We pray to You in our weakness, because we cannot go through life's troubles unscathed. We are stressed and strained, but we know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for the energy and vision of Your Spirit, for those who are tiring in the battle against injustice and oppression; for those exhausted by the struggle with poverty and hunger. We ask for the hope and comfort of Your Spirit, for those whose lives are overshadowed by illness or pain; for those whose lives are darkened by sorrow or bereavement. We ask for the peace and joy of Your Spirit, for those living in the shadow of war and violence; for those eaten up by guilt and anxiety and whose life has become hard and dry. We ask for the guidance and strength of Your Spirit, for those uncertain how to use their time, talents and gifts; for those tempted to do what is wrong. We ask for the love and courage of Your Spirit, for those reaching out to comfort the distressed; for those reaching out to others with the Good News.

Help us to see Your presence in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

The Suddath Family Deanna Muzzulin Sue Kenny Sean Larose

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 105

O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered, O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth. He is mindful of his covenant for ever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, 'To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance.'

Acts 15:1-11

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.' 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. 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. 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. 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.'

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. 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. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. 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? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'