

#103
January 26, 2019
Acts 15: 1-6 (NRSV)

What Will the Church Do?

“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.”

⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.



There is one issue that I have been struggling since I arrived. It is chili. I am convinced that chili soup must be without macaroni. So we need to solve this problem at New Life and make some rules to have just the right chili. I would like us to discuss and get this straightened for the future, once and for all. I propose that chili with macaroni not be allowed in potlucks. So you people on my right side will help me win that debate. Pretend you support my opinion. Everyone on my left will think that is silly and we should always serve chili with macaroni. Pretend you are strong believers of chili with pasta. I will give just a couple minutes to solve this. Please share your argument why or why not we should have chili without pasta.

I looked up some history about chili. All I found were legends and stories. One popular tale tells of a Spanish nun, Sister Mary of Agreda, who supernaturally appeared

to Native Americans in the early 1600s and returned with the first recipe for chili: chili peppers, venison (deer meat), onions, and tomatoes. Notice: no beans were in the recipe.

We get ourselves embroiled in the fiercest arguments and use all our energy trying to prove things that really do not matter in the big picture. As for me the question is: Why did I even start this debate about chili? I do not even cook.

Yes, this is a silly illustration. The truth is that there are many serious, difficult and very real issues in families, at work, in school and in church. We often get our feelings hurt. We get angry and we lose joy and unity because we want to prove ourselves right. We lose the ability to listen to each other.

Civil discourse is becoming a lost art. Look at the social media such as Facebook to see all the name calling and abusive language. In the political realm there is way too much mud being thrown. We get into a silo with like-minded people and become convinced that we are right. I am right, therefore you have to be wrong.

This week, John Roberts, the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, scolded the senators. He used a funny word that probably no one in this room ever heard before: He told them to stop “pettifogging”, which means being petty, mean and unethical about insignificant and trivial matters. It is nasty arguing.

It is so easy to slip into my agenda based on my truth. We lose the ability to discuss and agree or even to agree to disagree. How then, do we expect to hear and see and discern God’s will?

Paul and Barnabas came back from their first missionary journey praising God for opening the doors to Gentiles. It sounds like a happy conclusion. “Then certain individuals came down from Judea...” Oh-oh! Can’t you already smell the trouble?



These certain individuals were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”. In other words, you have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. It is clear from Paul’s stories that all these gentiles were welcomed into church fellowship without being circumcised. They became Christians by faith and circumcision was not included.

Throughout the missionary journey they encountered Jews who were opposed to the church. Now it is some Jews within the church. As we have seen early in the book of Acts, some of the most thorny problems came from inside the church – widows not served, murmuring, Ananias and Sapphira, John Mark going a.w.o.l. Persecutions from outside the church did not seem to bother them at all. In fact, they thanked God for the opportunity to suffer for Christ’s kingdom.

This specific issue has long ago passed away as a concern to us; but the principle behind it is very, very present with us yet today. How do we deal with disagreement?

First, let’s look at these Jewish critics. They raised a natural and good question. The first Christians were Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. Circumcision, in fact, represented a covenant with God and commitment to keep the whole Mosaic law. Circumcision is a God-given sign of the covenant.

It is in the Bible. It is important because Moses said so. It identified them as God’s people. They were not opposed to the Gentile mission, but were determined that it must be done according the Scriptures and tradition.



This doctrinal issue also posed a practical problem: how could Jewish Christians enjoy table fellowship with Gentile Christians if Gentiles failed to keep the same ritual laws the Jews did? These Gentile believers, who had just come out of raw paganism,

who had been idolaters, had been devotees of the licentious and sexually immoral practices of the pagan temples will join Jews? It cannot happen.

These certain people who came from Judea believed they were right. They were sincere in their faith and understanding of the Scriptures. They actually did not come just to cause trouble. The early church did not have the New Testament to lean on as part of their Scriptures. The early church was the New Testament. The words were being written as their story unfolded. We have to hear and understand the true and big issue the church faced. What will the church do? The gospel is in dispute. Can Gentiles be saved and accepted into the church the way they are? The future of the church is challenged. Will it stay together or will it form two separate churches? It is a question of salvation.

“Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them.” A church fight is not always bad. A dispute, if handled properly, can lead to greater clarity, a stronger bond and more faithful witness.

John Wesley had a good rule of thumb: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

This problem was essential. It was about the nature of salvation. It had to be resolved and quickly.

For Paul and Barnabas, the Gospel is about grace and mercy and forgiveness of sins – not the law. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. If what this group is saying is true, then the grace of God in Christ is not enough for salvation.

Most of the Christians in Antioch were Gentiles. They could have just split from the church in Jerusalem, but unity of faith was important to them as it is to us today.

So 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. It was not a small issue to debate. What would they decide?

What I like about these verses is that nobody gets divine words. We argue about all kinds of things: property, parsonages, pastors, sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, the environment, church & state.

God is not saying to one group or another who is right. God works through the people. God trusts people to discern and make decisions together. Methodists call it holy conferencing.

They were searching for the answers and giving time. They traveled 250 miles to Jerusalem. On their way to the Jerusalem, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the

believers. Paul and Barnabas did not lose the opportunity to share joy with others as they traveled.

Do you and I bring joy as we pass through a community?

Even in Jerusalem, at the mother church, people rejoiced when they heard the testimonies from Paul and Barnabas. 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."

In Antioch their argument was about keeping the custom or tradition. Now in Jerusalem they changed the argument to keeping the law.



Verse 6: The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. I want us to pause here. We will discover what happened next Sunday. We will hear how and why the decisions was made. As we pause today I want us as the church to pause, too. We have different beliefs about different subjects. Some subjects are crucial to us. We have strong beliefs.

From this reading of Acts 15:1-6 we learn at least 3 things:

1. First, Christians disagree. Strongly disagree.
2. Second, they were able to discuss. They were able to listen.
3. Third, and most importantly, they were able to see what God is doing. When you hear or read the Scripture, the first question should always be: What does it say about God?

Where I fall short is when I start arguing because I argue from my world of view. Just because I do not like the combined taste of chili and pasta, just because in my past I never had chili with macaroni, just because my palate disagrees with the combination, I want it to be my way. Can I eat it if I am hungry? Can I eat so I won't hurt others? Can I eat so I may have fellowship with people who made it and to be with people who

have different taste buds? Can I be quiet so as not to hurt, because maybe God is opening the doors for something different? Why do I want to win the conflict?

We can apply this illustration to just about any issue the church faces.

I have been praying earnestly that I want to know God's way. I am ready to lead the way God's wants me to go. I am ready to obey and to accept – not my way, but God's way.

I believe that God will lead. If we truly seek and are open for his way, we will know. I believe God gives wisdom for those who seek His wisdom.

As we continue to seek and serve as a church we need encouragement. Last Sunday we started an encouragement project. If you were not with us last Sunday, please write your name on a tag and drop it in the basket as you leave. For those who were here last Sunday, please go to the encouragement wall and get one name from it. You choose. Be an encourager for that person until Lent. For the next 4 weeks find ways to encourage that person. The wall is across from my office. Paul traveled hundreds of miles, Paul endured pain, suffering, stoning, to just go and encourage people to stay strong in their faith. Surely we can help each other and encourage each other to stay strong in their faith.