

The Middle Act
2019 02 17 TUMC Sermon
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Acts 14:27-15:33, Exodus 4:24-26

PETER: Good morning! Youth! Junior Youth! I know what it's like. The sermon. For hours and hours the sermon. Where I grew up, you brought your Bible to church. And when the preacher read the scripture you read it along with them. And sometimes, you carried on reading. That's how tough it was for us. We read the Bible to keep from falling asleep at the sermon. There was no library corner in my church. Activity period? Yeah the activity is listening to the sermon and the period is about 5 hours. And there were no tupperware containers with Cheerios. No wonder I defected to the Mennonites.

So the preacher would finish reading the bit in the Bible, and would start talking about it, but you would keep on reading, that was when you came to the really good stuff. Am I right, Ezra?

EZRA:

Exodus 14, verses 24-26. At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. So the Lord let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.)

PETER:

THE BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD. The most Metal passage in all of scripture. A bonkers story in the middle of a bunch of other nice Sunday School stories. God decides to kill Moses all of a sudden, but his wife saves them all by performing an emergency circumcision and touching the bloody foreskin to the feet of – well, in the original text it could be the feet of her son, of Moses, or of God. The translator just picked Moses because it was the least weird option.

It's not easy to know what to say about circumcision. Jacqui tells me that there are NO songs in our hymnal about Circumcision. Circumcision is either routine, ordinary, or it's bizarre, maybe barbaric, depending on your custom and community. I want to take it seriously in its significance for the people of Israel to this day. Circumcision of male children is the ancient symbol of membership, and the series of covenants that joined them with God. So much so that God could be said to be the husband of the nation – perhaps the Bridegroom of Blood?

EZRA: I thought that your sermon was going to be about boring church meetings?

PETER:

That's true, today we're looking at the very long meetings recorded in the book of Acts as the early church debates membership requirements. Specifically, should non-Jewish believers in Jesus have to be circumcised and become Jews in order to be part of the church. I know that we're talking to many people who have sat through many meetings so I thought we should try to start with something weird.

Yes, our church is deep into a multi-week study of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the early church and the crucial years following Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. All are invited

to read the whole book, and each week we gather to pay attention to where we see the acts of the Holy Spirit.

The preaching team designed this series with the guidance of John Epp, who shared with us an early version of his work exploring Acts. This way of reading scripture is different to a simple 'beginning to end' reading. Instead, we read the text as a series of rings around a centre. The beginning and end mirror each other. The next chapters from the beginning echo those just before the end. And so on until we reach the centre. Today we reach the centre.

The centre of the rings lets us know the reason for writing the whole. It tells us what is important. Unlike linear storytelling, which is focused on getting somewhere – completing a journey or addressing a problem, the ring structure is centred on something important. It invites us to contemplate changes through repeated patterns and differences in character or themes. Rather than a linear story which takes us to the destination and leaves us there, we get to the centre, and then go back along the same path and see what has changed as the result of what occurs in the centre.

The Book of Acts has this ring structure, and we followed John's division of the text into weekly portions, and today happens to be the centre of that structure. Further, each section has its own ring structure, including our passage today. For example, the beginning of our section (14:27-28) refers to an encouraging message and a lengthy stay, and those same elements are also at the end of our section (15:32-33). Further into the structure in 15:1 at the start and 15:30 at the end, we see people arriving in Antioch and speaking to the believers there. But what they say is very different, and to learn why we must journey into the centre. Let's begin the journey.

EZRA:

In the earlier chapters, Paul and Barnabas have been travelling widely, teaching about Jesus to the Jewish people living outside of Israel, as well as Gentiles, and people sometimes called 'God-fearers', who are Gentiles who have converted to the Jewish religion. Wherever they go, they find both success and challenge. Some people are convinced, and join the church, including Jews, Gentiles, and Gentiles converts. In each place they are opposed, sometimes by local Jews, other times by Gentiles, and often members of both communities. Paul and Barnabas eventually return to Antioch, and report to the church there "how God opened a door of faith to the Gentiles". And they stay in Antioch for a long while.

The reading begins at Chapter 15

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

PETER: Great, thanks. So -

EZRA: I'm not done. Verse 5 -

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

PETER: Ah. Tricky. That awkward moment at the Annual Meeting when someone stands up and makes it clear that they are not happy with the report they just heard. Quite the reversal for Paul. All the way there, every time they told the stories of how God was bringing all nations together, ‘this news made all the believers very glad’. But then, he must have known that this was coming. This is Jerusalem, and these believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees must have been connected with the people that Paul argued with when he returned to Antioch and found them telling all his Gentile converts that they needed to become Jews before they could become children of God through Jesus.

I am sure that Paul must have consulted the Jerusalem equivalent of the TUMC Discussion Guidelines, the covenant that we enter into as we make decisions as a community. Let's see how his adversaries fared according to our own rules:

1. Prepare for Discussion – they were clearly ready for Paul.
2. Respect Each Other – well, if respect means acknowledging that despite differences in theology, we are willing to listen to each other and dialogue... nope, these were hardliners. Their words are not disrespectful, but also not curious, not invitational.
3. Self-monitor – Our covenant asks us all to monitor our own participation so that you are a positive contributor to constructive dialogue. Refer to Appendix B for helpful tips. As the Jerusalem council were without the guidance of Appendix B we will let them off the hook.
4. Listen, and
5. Allow for uninterrupted speaking – I think they listened. They certainly gave Paul and Barnabas the space to make their case, but they didn't hear anything that changed their core conviction. As they said – the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses. Points for:
6. Brevity.
7. Speak civilly – They don't openly shame or condemn Paul for his work. They are certainly being civil. These days ‘being civil’ is a demand that has been weaponized from time to time against those who are justifiably angry, hurt, and sick and tired of dialogue over their basic dignity. If we were to revise this rule, we might choose to ask people to cultivate instead the fruits of the spirit like kindness and patience.
8. Take ownership for your thoughts and feelings – they certainly speak for themselves. But I think a great deal goes unsaid. Their demand carries a lot with it, and makes no apologies. Why must the Gentiles be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses? Is there something of the terror of the God who comes suddenly to kill his own prophet until his son is circumcised? Is it fair to allow these Gentiles equal standing if they have not put the work in?
9. Focus on the problem, not the person – What is the problem? The Law? Pride of heritage? Xenophobia? Fear of loss? On this point, they are pretty clear – they see the person AS the problem.
10. Give others the benefit of the doubt – consider what they have to say. Did this happen?

EZRA:

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

PETER: I have another short reading. It's from the Book of Face. It's in the genre of 'Shares From Your Aunt', and it concerns the mysterious witness of the man known only as Marine Todd.

A Marine was taking college classes between his deployments to Afghanistan.

One of his courses had a professor that was an atheist and a member of the ACLU. One day the professor shocked everyone by walking into class, looking up and stating "God, if you are real, I want you to come down and knock me off this platform, I will give you 15 minutes.

Several minutes tick by in silence, when the 15 min. time almost expired the Marine gets up from his seat, approaches the professor and punched him in the face knocking him off the platform and out cold. The Marine simply went back to his seat.

The professor came to, visibly shaken and asked the Marine, "What the heck did you do that for?!"

The Marine said, "God was busy protecting America's military who are out protecting your right to say stupid [stuff] like that, so he sent me to fill in."

This is not a story I wanted Ezra to read. This is not a story I want anyone to read. But ooooooh. Let's be honest. It's kind of satisfying. These types of morally and narratively simple stories get shares because they scratch an itch. They don't need to be true or even believable. The professor stood for 15 minutes in silence? At least I try to crack a few jokes. But there's an attraction in these stories, and I know because, yes, I roll my eyes when I see videos or Twitter transcripts that promise to 'destroy' Trump, or the Wall, or the Gun Lobby, but then I click on them anyway. I try at least to practice due diligence, checking facts and offering my own commentary if I share. I now subscribe to Snopes daily emails. But what is going on spiritually when I am consuming these jolts of rhetoric? And why am I bringing up Marine Todd and his absurd story? Is it because it's the perfect example of a linear narrative?

'The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Paul and Barnabas'. That line is the centre of this portion of the Book, which is the centre of the Book of Acts. How do you feel about that silence at the centre of the Book of Acts? What is that silence? Is it the silence of a defeated foe, lost for words, unable to speak? Is it a holy silence of God's presence, knitting

together and making a way? Where do you taste the Holy Spirit? The story of Marine Todd ends when he has silenced his opponent. There is no retort. But this story goes on beyond silence.

EZRA: When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. 14 Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

16 “After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
17 that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’—
18 things known from long ago.

PETER: The Apostle James summarizes the ways that Simon Peter described the Holy Spirit moving. God’s intervention to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. James goes on with the quotation from Amos, drawing upon the ancient prophetic promise of rebirth for Israel and God claiming all peoples into one family. James doesn’t simply endorse Paul or criticize another party. He says ‘Yes, this is what is happening. Yes, we’ve all heard this, we’ve all seen this. This is how the Holy Spirit is moving.’ And then he goes on:

EZRA:

19 “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21 For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

PETER:

Having established that the Holy Spirit is working many ways to bring the Gentiles into God’s family, James seems to be proposing rules Gentiles must follow, four things to abstain from:

- Things polluted by idols. Our translation mentions food which is a concern of Paul in his letters.
- Sexual immorality
- The meat of strangled animals
- Blood

Why these four things? It seems like a compromise – a symbolic gesture to the hardline faction that the Gentiles will need to accommodate their Torah-observant siblings, for example, not serving food with blood, which is not permitted to the Jews.

But curiously enough, Torah students had already, long ago, worked out a set of rules that all of humanity was meant to follow, with the Jews called to observe a much more rigorous law as a result of their closer covenant with God. These rules are meant to be based on the universal covenant that God establishes with Noah and all his descendants – which is to say, everyone.

These laws look a bit like James's proposal – no sexual immorality, not eating blood, and refusing idols. But James ignores several other laws in that covenant, making it a less binding expectation on Christian Gentiles than the people believed already applied to all Gentiles.

The key turns out to be the reference to strangling animals. This appears nowhere in Torah law, but is a reference to a pagan method of sacrificing animals to idols as a community ritual.

We misunderstand James and the book of Acts if we see these as rules to excuse the Gentiles from being circumcised. Instead these are rules for people who were formed in Roman cosmopolitan culture, the violence and oppression of Imperial life, and are being called out, into a close communion with a diverse church of Jesus followers.

The Gentile Christians must turn away from idols, and things associated with idols, and the ways that idol-worship is used to form communities centred on death and violence. Even the word translated as sexual immorality is one that is often used in scripture to denounce relationships with violent and imperial power, and it has that same resonance here.

Consider this interpretation, as you listen for the repetition of these rules.

EZRA:

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. 23 With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:
Greetings.

24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

PETER:

'you would do well to avoid these things'. Speaking these words is the work of the church, seeing that the Holy Spirit is bringing all people to Jesus, and offering guidance in rejecting the ways of Empire – replacing violence and dehumanization with community and dignity, bringing people together into service of one another, not of idols nor emperors nor our own desires.

I hope that this also helps to explain the infamous phrase 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'. It's pretty funny if we read it as the Apostles magnanimously agreeing with the Holy Spirit, or perhaps referencing the Holy Spirit as a way to make their decision seem more important. I hope we can instead see that, although there are no miracles and no anointing, this whole section is suffused with the Holy Spirit. James pulls together all of the threads from the Acts,

from the early stories of Simon Peter and the Apostles, the ongoing experiences of Paul and Barnabas, the prophetic witness, and I absolutely believe, the unrecorded stories of the women, the enslaved people, and all other exiles and outsiders who received the Holy Spirit in defiance of all decent good order, and breaking all the rules.

As we continue our study in the weeks ahead, moving out from the centre, let us watch for the ways this Jerusalem council decision is - and is not - upheld

EZRA:

30 So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. 32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. 33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

TOGETHER: AMEN