

May 14, 2017 – Easter 5

“Bearing Witness: ‘They’ Are Like Us”

Scripture: Acts 15:1-18

Last week, with the Ethiopian Eunuch, we saw the expansion of the Good News to ‘the ends of the earth’ by way of Philip’s interaction with the Eunuch. We saw that by an ever-widening spiral of Interest, Deepening, and Immersion, the new faith in the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection expanded and still expands to this very day. By following the interests of the Holy Spirit, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch deepened their relationship in such a way that both of them were immersed into the community of faith.

It is an exciting and raucous way to expand the faith, but if we do that for a while, different ideas about how to do things together arise very quickly. That is the situation the very early church is in at this point in the Book of Acts today.

The story itself is pretty mundane, actually – just another church meeting, isn’t it?

It is an important church meeting, though, because at this meeting the church doors are opened to all Gentiles without qualification. After this meeting, there are no external qualifications to be met. You don’t have to be from a Jewish family. You don’t have to be circumcised. You don’t have to follow all the dietary laws. The doors are opened to any and all to join in the promise of Jesus’ Resurrection. It is quite a powerful decision to come out of a church meeting, isn’t it?

This decision to open the doors to people in whom, as Peter says, “*God has made no distinction between them and us*” is what is called a ‘*consensus decision*’. That phrase should be familiar to all of us, since it is a bedrock principle of the Congregational Way.

Very quickly, let’s go through Acts 15 and see how this comes about. I realize analyzing a church meeting might not be exciting, but I think there is something quite telling in what is going on here. Our story starts with a conflict. Some people who believe Jesus is merely an extension of the Jewish tradition seek to impose their view on the new church in Antioch, which Barnabas and Paul have started.

An argument starts, a church crisis, if you will, with the traditionalists who want to require circumcision and adherence to Old Testament rules as conditions for admittance into the church. Barnabas and Paul think differently.

So the local church appeals to outside authority and sends Barnabas and Paul as diplomats to the church in Jerusalem. Once in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul present the concerns of the Antioch church. Some of the Pharisees who believe in Jesus agree with the traditionalists in Antioch. An open discussion follows and the leaders of the churches consider all the opinions. They listen to the testimony of those who have gone out to the Gentiles. They reference Scripture. Then they arrive at a decision, a consensus, based on all the available information.

Notice, if you will, that the phrase “*what God had done with them*” is repeated several times throughout this event. God works through this wild, spiraling, circulating expansion of the faith to bring all kinds of people into the fellowship of the faith. Decisions need to be made about what that will look like.

Amos 3:3 asks, “*Can two walk together except they have agreed?*” How will those agreements, those church meetings, those councils, determine the shape of the church as it goes forward into the future?

At the Benedictine monastery I go to sometimes, there is a plaque on the wall as you go towards the chapel for daily prayers. It is a summation of the 4th Lateran Council instituted by Pope Innocent III, in which it is very clearly stated, “*There is indeed one universal church of the faithful, outside of which nobody at all is saved...*” (*Constitution 1 of the 4th Lateran Council*). The plaque is a little daunting because it has quotes from later church councils which clarify that the ‘universal church’ also means ‘the Holy Catholic Church, which is the only one true church on Earth’.

I am not going to get into a sectarian battle over such a claim, but what I will do is affirm what the Congregational tradition affirms. The Congregational tradition looks to this reading from Acts today as a foundation and justification for its structure.

This first church council in Jerusalem is not a fight about doctrine necessarily, although the decision influences how we understand doctrine. It is not a fight about behavior, though its outcome certainly influences behavior. It isn't really a fight at all.

Rather, the first council of Jerusalem is a consensus building event guided by the power of the Holy Spirit, an event which just so happens to open the doors of the early church wide. The early church looked out on the confusing, embattled, divided world and, through a process of seeking deeper understanding, discovered that the ones designated as 'they' were also like 'us'. Or rather, 'we' are 'them' in the light of the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. If that is so, what is to prevent 'them' from being baptized, like the Ethiopian Eunuch? What is preventing 'them' from joining the church?

I think the first church council of Jerusalem is a great model for the entire church. If the fruits of the Spirit are measured by the works of the church, then a simple church meeting becomes an opportunity to mirror this first all-church meeting in Jerusalem.

That becomes an interesting foundation, doesn't it, especially if we look at the outcomes of that first meeting? In that case, the doors are opened wide. What if all church meetings were about opening doors, rather than closing them?

In the Congregational tradition, the local church is gathered based on the free-will choice of the members to adhere to the agreed-upon covenant of that local church, in which Jesus Christ is the head. While some church meetings may be about opening the doors wide, it is important to recognize that, in reaching a consensus, limits are also created. The church's door is opened wide, but it is still a church where people accept – freely and in communion with those gathered – that Jesus Christ is the Resurrected Lord and leader of the church. That recognition is self-limiting in many ways, and that is okay.

Rev. Dr. Janet Wooten, who is a leader in the International Congregational Federation, speaks about the consensus of the Congregational Way in this way:

“While some may find security in obedience and certainty, what attracts people to congregationalism is its openness to intellectual honesty and the fact that it values and honours every member’s experience of God. This is evident in the church meeting, in which consensus is sought by the full participation of every member under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I wonder at the God who trusts ordinary human beings to hold such awesome responsibility for the gospel message, until I remember how the same God offers gifts and empowerment and wisdom to those same ordinary people. In this way, the congregational system is in keeping with Jesus’ own overturning of the established power structures of the world. Where the world honours the rich, the powerful, people with advantages of class or education, Jesus spoke of the first being last, and countered power struggles among his own disciples with references to servant hood,

denouncing greed for power as an alien, worldly concept (Mark 10:35-45)”¹.

It is a little bit of a frightening prospect, this consensus by way of the Holy Spirit. The potential to descend into chaos is high, and without the grace of God, that is a likely outcome when any group of people come together. We have guides and examples and help, however. Mary Hinkle Shore, in her commentary on these verses, says we have 3 sources of light to guide us.

The First source is Scripture. James uses the Prophet Amos to back up the leaders’ decision to open the church to Gentiles without condition. Scripture is the interpretive anchor for our decision making as a church.

The Second source is Experience. Peter testifies to his experience with Cornelius back in Acts 10 at this meeting. There, he realized *“God shows no partiality”*.

¹ KEYNOTE TALK GIVEN TO THE SEMINAR IN PLIMOTH, MASSACHUSETTS, SATURDAY 11TH NOVEMBER 2000 SEMINAR TITLE: ‘ARE WE WHO WE SAY WE ARE?’ By Rev. Dr. Janet Wooten, Ph. D.

God's grace doesn't really care about where you are from or what you believed before or what you have done prior to coming to faith. Then Barnabas and Paul testify to all their ministry work among the Gentiles. Personal experience matters in the church. Testifying to the light of Christ is a powerful force and reference point for how God is working through us in the world.

The Third source is Interpretation. Last week, remember, we reflected on what it means to be an 'interpretive community'. Interpretation is not in and of itself the end, but rather the means whereby we seek to understand how God and Christ are present for us now and in our daily lives. We do this by taking in what we read in Scripture, reflecting on our personal experience, then talking, conversing, arguing with our covenanted and fellow believers. In that way, we reach a consensus about what to do next.

Last week, we had our Annual Meeting. I thought it went well. There was a gentle and good spirit in the room during our meeting. It was just another meeting in the long history of church meetings for this church. But reflect on it for a moment.

What if we understood that meeting and all our meetings, that mundane, normal, common meeting, as a reflection of this first church meeting in Acts 15? What if, in some way, we as Congregationalists were living into the Apostolic tradition, into the deep history of the church, by meeting together just as Barnabas, Paul, Peter, James and the rest of the disciples did all those many years ago?

Then, the church meeting which seeks consensus, is a powerful tradition. It is '*the way they used to do things*'. It is also how we, ideally, do things as Congregationalists. In meeting together to seek the consensus of those gathered in covenant and faith, they – those disciples of days gone past - are like us, and we – the covenanted body of believers at Rockland Congregational Church - are like them.

By the power of the Resurrected Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.