

I chose to take a couple of risks this morning. My first was to select the image you see on the front of the bulletin and the second was change the title for today's worship from the super-exciting *The Jerusalem Council* to the much more provocative, *We have to welcome them?! Now for those of you who came today with a plan to join as new members of Holy Cross, I really, really hope you aren't offended.* And, if you are worshipping with us online, the image that I chose says, "Welcome - ish" and then in parentheses, "Depends who you are." Of course, it's a bit crazy to say that on *any* Sunday, but especially on the one that we are welcoming new members!

Nevertheless, I hope that we can all have an appreciation of some satire once in awhile. Because believe it or not, I chose that image and that title for today based on today's preaching text from the book of Acts, not because of any hesitancy that I or anyone is feeling about welcoming any and all of our new members. So, with that in mind, I'd like you to grab a pencil right now and cross out the "ish" so it just says "Welcome" and then add the word "doesn't" before the "depends on who you are" (and for those of us like me who are grammar geeks, you then need to cross out the "s" so it says, "Welcome - *Doesn't* depend who you are.")

But as easy as that was (and I hope that you actually did it) decisions about who was welcome and who was not were not nearly so easy in the early days of the Church. Back in chapter eleven of the book of Acts, Peter had gone up to Jerusalem to "Church Headquarters" to explain step by step how it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that Gentiles were given the gift of the Holy Spirit. At the end of Peter's testimony he tells them, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" And *that* story concludes with this wonderful pair of statements, "When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'" In other words, from now on, it *doesn't* depend on who you are!

Now while there were many new Christians at this time, they were also being persecuted. So that led to a diaspora, causing the growth of the church to expand into

more and more new regions. On the one hand then, there was cause for celebration, but on the other hand, there was grave concern. We know this from the opening of chapter twelve in which we hear that another King Herod (a nephew and grandson to the earlier ones) “had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.” Now if that wasn’t enough, that the Church was being persecuted by Romans, there was still this thorny issue about whether or not the Church should welcome Gentiles, that is non-Jews. So there were threats from outside, and conflicts from within.

Understandably, yet regrettably, either not everyone got that memo that Gentiles were to be given a full welcome (as had been decided in chapter eleven) or (more likely) some that did hear about that decision were not willing to get on board with this new plan. For many believers, they apparently thought that they knew better. For them, it was very much a matter of “Welcome-ish — Depends who you are.” We know this from the opening of our reading today, in chapter fifteen, “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.’” I am sure that to these certain individuals, this felt like they were offering a grand welcome. I have little doubt that they believed they were making a tremendous sacrifice and a gracious overture by opening up the club to new members... but only so long as they could include circumcision as a requirement for salvation. Certainly, they could argue that they had tradition on their side... every male had been circumcised for thousands of years... and they even could cite chapter and verse from the Torah; just look up Genesis, chapter seventeen. But to Paul and Barnabas, this notion of entrance requirements being placed upon the Gentiles was not acceptable, in truth, it was beyond maddening. Our story puts it rather mildly, “And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them...” In other words, it was an all-out battle of words and ideas.

And with that, Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go back to Church Headquarters in Jerusalem and speak with the apostles and elders to try to clarify things once more. Now, the journey that they set out on probably took at least three weeks —

they were on foot and traveling over land. And though it might be difficult for us to imagine, this was a really big deal. As they traveled, they must have been full of anxiety. How might the Church, the apostles, and the elders decide? What if the leaders went back on their earlier decision and because of wanting to “make peace” chose the old traditions and laws believing that was the safer course of action? Of course, these kinds of challenges for the Church are not just a matter of studying ancient history. They come up again and again. Going not all that far back those debates have included, Can women vote in a congregation? Can they serve on the Church Council? Can women become ordained? Who is welcome to come forward for communion — only members? What kind of welcome is permitted to people who have been divorced? Can all people in loving, committed relationships get married? Can people who are not heterosexual become ordained? And on and on I could go (and you too, I bet), listing the myriad questions and debates.

Now returning to our story, we hear how much success Paul and Barnabas were enjoying as they made their trek to Jerusalem. And they were welcomed upon arrival. But for some of the believers, the walls that had been erected and the rules and laws were deemed still very necessary. Sooo... “The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.” Now please take note that they didn’t avoid each other. Nor did they go on the talk show circuit to insult each other to control the narrative nor did they lob grenades via Twitter and Facebook in an attempt to out-fundraise their opponents so they could run a smear campaign against one another. It just says that they debated one another. And if this sounds all-too-quiet, then I fear we may be in more dire straits than I think.

Anyway, we hear that then Peter got up and gave his testimony. A part of it is this: “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.*” In other words, this is truly a God thing that we are witnessing happening among us and do we dare stand in God’s way? And then there’s another beautifully

expansive understanding about what God is doing that Peter shares, “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” And once again, just as what happened in chapter eleven, we hear “the whole assembly kept silence.” That is the key to the whole story — the silence — something that is just far too rare these days. Most of us have a terribly hard time with silence. We talk over each other constantly. And when we don’t, many of us aren’t really listening to someone we do not agree with, we’re just preparing in our minds what we’re going to say next. But if, and when, we can stop to appreciate the sound of silence it can give room for the Holy Spirit to direct us, to speak to us.

And that’s what happened. By pausing to listen, really listen, they were then able to hear Barnabas and Paul as they shared their testimony about “all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.” And, “After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me.’” And after supporting the testimony of Simon Peter, he then explains to those assembled how this actually “agrees with the words of the prophets.” What James does is he uses the words of the prophet Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah; that’s quite the trifecta. These prophecies point to how God will rebuild Jerusalem after its destruction but no less importantly “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 known from long ago.”

So, according to Paul and Barnabas, and Peter and James, and the prophets, and the Holy Spirit, and according to God’s plan it’s a done deal. The welcome is for all. Gentiles can be brought in as Gentiles, they too are marked as holy and beloved. There can be no message of “Welcome-ish (Depends who you are).” The reality for the early Church and for us still today is that the doors of the church are open to everyone. Amen

Narrative.3 Acts 15:1-18

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