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EASTER 5 – Draw the Circle Wide, *The World Community*

Scripture: Acts 15: 1-18

Global Connection

By: Pastor Ryan J. Scott

SCRIPTURE: ACTS 15: 1-18

It wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: "If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved." Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.

³ After they were sent off and on their way, they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the non-Jewish outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!

⁴⁻⁵ When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders. Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. "You have to circumcise the pagan converts," they said. "You must make them keep the Law of Moses."

⁶⁻⁹ The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ "So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?"

¹²⁻¹³ There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop.

13-18 James broke the silence. “Friends, listen. Simeon has told us the story of how God at the very outset made sure that racial outsiders were included. This is in perfect agreement with the words of the prophets:

After this, I’m coming back;
I’ll rebuild David’s ruined house;
I’ll put all the pieces together again;
I’ll make it look like new
So outsiders who seek will find,
so they’ll have a place to come to,
All the pagan peoples
included in what I’m doing.

“God said it and now he’s doing it. It’s no afterthought; he’s always known he would do this.

SERMON

Will you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Many of here have been following the United Methodist Church’s struggle with LGBTQ inclusion for many years now. But for those of you who haven’t kept up with the recent news I’ll fill you real quick.

At General Conference last year, which is the global legislative body of the UMC, the church debated on whether or not LGBTQ persons were compatible with Christian teaching. On this hinges whether or not LGBTQ people can serve as clergy, whether or not LGBTQ people can get married in the church, and whether or not a pastor can marry a same sex couple.

The church argued and prayed, and eventually in an act of desperation the delegates called upon the council of Bishops to assume leadership over the matter. The council met and decided that the UMC would engage in a three year process of listening and problem solving in order to find a way forward. In 2019

the delegates of the 2016 General Conference will gather again to hopefully find a way for us to be a united denomination and avoid a schism.

This is an issue that has weighed on me a lot. As a gay follower of Christ who felt a call to go into ministry I have been left at times feeling conflicted. How could I join a denomination that refuses to recognize my gifts? How do I work to prop up an institution that actively discriminates against LGBTQ children of God?

Honestly, If I was living in the south or the Midwest I probably wouldn't be a pastor, or even involved in the church for that matter. I didn't claim the church as my own faith until I heard a pastor preach a sermon where he said LGBTQ people were not sinful because who they loved or desired to be. It wasn't until words of welcome and inclusion were spoken to me that I felt welcomed into the United Methodist Church. This why I am thrilled that we overwhelmingly voted to become a reconciling congregation.

Our scripture story today isn't too different than what the church is going through today.

We have the church from Jerusalem, the traditionalists who demand that we follow the law of Moses. And we have the church of Antioch primarily a church full of gentile converts who do not see the laws of Moses as a barrier to salvation.

The church is steeped in argument and disagreement. A contentious debate, tempers are on the rise. In this moment the church makes the most impactful theological declaration in it's history. To this day our church rests on the decision made in this meeting.

Think about the stakes. Has there ever been a time in your life where in the heat of an argument the stakes felt so high that whatever the outcome would it change your life forever?

It's in these moments we feel tense, we're at risk of saying something damaging, we're anxious, we're scared. This, I imagine is how these church leaders were feeling at the time.

After all, the church of Antioch wanted to change a long standing spiritual custom that they felt was a commandment directly from God. They literally thought that if someone was not circumcised they could not know God.

But as we know from reading the scripture, and the fact that the church is the way it is today these church leaders ultimately decided that gentiles could be a part of the church and could know God and receive salvation just like the Jews could.

So what changed?

Relationship. Relationship is what transformed the early church. In the heat of the argument Peter testifies that Cornelius, a gentile, had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost before he did. Peter delivers an impassioned argument and testimony and the council became silent. Then Barnabas and Paul reported all of the amazing conversions, baptisms, and faithfulness of the gentiles they had encountered in their mission. They testified to miracles and great deeds of God working through the gentile people.

Again there was silence, James speaks up now, recalling how Simeon has told them about God's radical inclusivity and then testified to the words of the prophet Amos where it is said the Pagans will have a place and will be included in what God is doing.

Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James didn't just quote scripture. They lifted up individual stories and relationships they had made while teaching through the countryside.

And then a final point is made by James. “God said it and now God’s doing it. It’s no afterthought; he’s always known he would do this.”

So today, as we continue our focus on our United Methodist Social Principles we do so in the midst of a denomination in great struggle. In struggle partly because we are a global church.

Because our denomination reaches nearly every corner of the earth we have a multitude of voices, customs, and traditions that separate us from one another. Even here in the US there are major differences in churches in the Western Jurisdiction and the South Central Jurisdiction.

We have these barriers that we have constructed to exclude people who threaten our traditions and customs. These barriers keep us all in our place. If you’re in the west you’re likely part of a reconciling church because nearly every church out here is reconciling, or if you are in the south you part of a church that doesn’t welcome LGBTQ persons with open arms. If you’re in the west you’re likely to find people in the pews who do not consider themselves Christians. Whereas, in other areas atheists and agnostic people wouldn’t dare go to church. In the west, someone who identifies as a conservative may not feel as welcomed as a liberal and vice versa in the south.

This is a problem, because God has no such barriers. God’s circle extends beyond what our definitions of church are. God’s love and mercy extends outward to include everyone in the circle.

This will be a challenge for our global church. How do we serve the world and demonstrate the radical inclusivity of Christ when we are all just so darned different?

If we go back to the scripture you may notice that it never says anywhere that the traditionalist Jews had to give up their traditions. The church decided to include gentiles, but in doing so they did not exclude the traditionalists.

The same can be true today. You can disagree with me on everything under the sun, but as long as your disagreement doesn't hurt other people I can worship and be in community with you. If you think being gay is a sin, you can do that as long as your opinion isn't used to hurt others and I can worship and be in community with you.

If we can learn to live in covenant with one other and seek to love one another, I think we can remain a united global church.

John Wesley's rule of life comes to mind, "Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God." None of that requires you to give up your convictions, traditions, or opinions.

Just as James testifies God's plan has never been to be exclusive. From the outset God has made sure that outsiders were included. The prophet Amos says, "Outsiders who seek will find, they'll have a place to come to. All the Pagan people will be included."

This should be no surprise to us. This has been how God has operated since the beginning of time. Drawing a Circle so wide that we cannot fathom where the edges reach. It is through Jesus that we are challenged to draw our circle, our opinions, our perspectives, our relationships, our frame of mind wider and wider, including those we don't agree with.

As a church we are challenged to do the same. Which is why I still love the UMC despite its active discrimination of LGBTQ people. I know that there is hope for our global connection. I know that God is still working within people called United Methodists to draw the circle wide. And we, Trinity United Methodist Church are living proof that God still breathes in our denomination. A couple weeks ago we took action to say that we will draw the circle wider. We will include people who aren't like us and we will do so with joy.

The words of Isaiah often get put to use when the church is undergoing a transformation. "I am doing a new thing, now it springs up, can you not perceive it?" But I would contend that the words of James fit this situation better.

"God said it and now he's doing it. It's no afterthought; he's always known he would do this."

Inclusion is no afterthought to God.

Drawing a wide circle is no afterthought.

Welcoming the gentile is no afterthought.

Calling LGBTQ people into ministry is no afterthought.

God's mercy is not afterthought.

The Grace of God is not afterthought.

God said it and now God is doing it! It's no afterthought; he's always known he would do this.

Thanks be to God. Amen.