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Acts 15:1-14, 19-21

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.'<sup>2</sup>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.<sup>3</sup>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.<sup>4</sup>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.<sup>5</sup>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.'

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.<sup>7</sup>After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.<sup>8</sup>And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup>and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.<sup>10</sup>Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

<sup>12</sup>The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.<sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me.<sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.

<sup>19</sup>Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, <sup>20</sup>but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.<sup>21</sup>For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'

### Being Multicultural Part 3: Radical Hospitality

Here we are at the third and final installment of my sermon series on Being Multicultural. First, we examined the question of who are we? We looked at the passage from the prophet Isaiah where God says that my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Last week, we turned to Paul's letter to the Romans and considered how truly to live into God's call for us to be the Body of Christ. Instead of being a melting pot where identities are melted down and aggregated, we are a body where the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." We all need the different gifts each one brings and we are members one of another.

This week we continue reading from the New Testament, this time from the Acts of the Apostles. The book of Acts has been called a book about the Holy Spirit because it begins with the Spirit coming at Pentecost and continues with the early Christians' struggles to figure out what to do next. Before, they had been with Jesus who was a physical person they could follow and consult, though they were often confused by his responses. Now, they have the Holy Spirit guiding, which as we know, can be somewhat difficult at times.

One challenge that comes up again and again in the Book of Acts is the question of the Gentiles, what do we do with the Gentiles? All the disciples are Jews; Jesus was a Jew. Christianity is a Jewish movement. They have no idea what to do now that there are Gentiles who want to follow Christ. Can you even do that without following the laws of the Hebrew people, without becoming a Jew?

Our passage today is the council at which they settle this question once and for all: The Council at Jerusalem. Let's get some background to this story, so we really know how important this council was.

After Pentecost, the disciples have dispersed throughout the lands to preach the Good News among the synagogues. Unexpectedly, Peter has a vision in Acts 10. The vision is that of a sheet being lowered from the clouds that has all sorts of unclean animals on it. He hears a voice that says "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter insists that he won't do so since he has strictly followed the eating codes his entire life and will not be tempted to do otherwise. The voice insists a second and third time "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

Just then, a Roman Centurion named Cornelius (a Gentile) arrives at his house. Though Peter does not yet understand his vision, he goes with Cornelius and eventually preaches to him and his household. The Holy Spirit descends on this group of Gentiles in a kind of second Pentecost. It's amazing!

When it is all over, Peter sits down to eat with them, something strictly forbidden by Jewish purity codes.

After this encounter, Peter goes to Jerusalem to tell the apostles and elders about what happened. They are all amazed and agree that God is calling the Gentiles to follow Christ as well.

This is in chapters 10 and 11 respectively. Then in chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas are minding their own business preaching to the Gentiles, when they get in an argument with someone who says Gentiles must become Jews before they can follow Christ. Paul disagrees, and they assemble a party to return to Jerusalem and speak to the apostles and elders.

The Council at Jerusalem is in the center of book of Acts, with 14 chapters before the Council, and 13 chapters after. It functions as a pivot point for the rest of the Acts narrative. The rest of the book is mainly about Paul and his mission to the Gentiles.

Interestingly enough, the Council at Jerusalem is not in the regular schedule of lectionary readings. Peter's vision in chapter 10 is, but not the Council. So, you may not have heard about this much outside of your own bible reading.

The Council is the final deciding point at which the early church leaders figure out the details of what it means to have Gentiles fully accepted in the fold. I am glad that they made the decision they did, because it made it possible for me to know about Christ, most likely it made it possible for you to know about Christ too.

I wonder how much debate there was, how much hand-wringing, how much disagreement. The passage doesn't say how long they met, how they argued. All we know is that after hearing Paul's case, Peter spoke in favor of it and James made the final decisive speech.

Before we go jumping to any conclusions, I want to say that I do not read this story as a perfect analogy for our own situation. In other words, I do not equate certain populations of this congregation with the Jews and others with the Gentiles. I want to be clear that is not what we have to learn from this story.

What we have to learn about their struggles is that the Holy Spirit called them to radical hospitality. They struggled with it because it's not easy to completely change your focus as a community.

In my sermon series, I intentionally chose to put hospitality at the end because true hospitality usually comes after a process of prayer and deep discipleship. Most people think that hospitality takes place when you first meet someone. And it usually includes hand shaking and beverages with cocktail napkins.

Yes, that is hospitality too – taking care of new comers' physical needs. I am talking about radical hospitality that welcomes, accepts, listens and embraces. Radical hospitality that notices, prays and transforms.

More often than not the one extending hospitality has made an intentional choice. There is a process of inner transformation before true hospitality, true welcome, is possible. I don't know if we ever truly get there.

This church has made several intentional choices to welcome outsiders, to open our building and to reach out to our neighbors.

For the Apostles and Elders at the Council in Jerusalem, hospitality is where they ended up. They thought long and hard about this very question, and it was unclear which side they would come down on.

And what about their decision – is it really such radical hospitality if they have all of these rules that they make the Gentiles follow? I'm talking about the laws in vv 19-21 that concluded James's decision for inclusion.

v. 20 "...we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood."

When I first read this verse, I read it like this –

Well, ok fine, the Gentiles don't *have* to be circumcised and follow every single law but at the very least you have to give us these basic moral principles as a concession.

On second reading, these rules take on a different tone. You see, faithful Hebrews had certain purity codes that did not permit them to eat with people unless they met certain criteria. Some of these include abstaining from things polluted by idols, from fornication, from blood and from whatever has been strangled.

The rules in vv 19-21 are not bottom line moral requirement for entry into the Christian community. These rules make it possible for all Christians to *eat together* – Christians who follow the purity codes and those who do not. This is the ultimate sign of the Gentiles' FULL inclusion.

James gives us a clue when he says "only" – the Gentiles only have to do these few things. The believers who kept to the purity codes were aloud to do so, and those who hadn't followed these customs did not have to start following them.

Here is a group of believers who went against scripture and tradition in order to follow what the Spirit said and welcome new people into the fold

In preparation for today's sermon, I asked a few people who have joined the church in the past year what their experiences have been coming to Westminster.

One person felt more welcomed here than in other congregations they had visited, even in congregations where the majority culture was their own.

When asked about coming together across cultures, another person spoke of the story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, and how he *consistently* broke down barriers, reached out to people he shouldn't and made people feel down right uncomfortable in order to spend time with all people. Isn't that a perfect model for how we should be with those around us?

Yet another spoke of how important it is when people remember you. As a visitor walking into to a different community on your own, it made a big impression to have people recall having met you before.

Today we affirm our own commitment to hospitality as we hear from ancient believers whose hospitality was bold, even radical. Many people did not agree with them and thought that they were giving up too much or that their theology was all wrong. Here was a group divided, and the powerful chose to be on the side of the powerless.

I said earlier that the analogy of this story is not a perfect parallel with the life of this congregation – it's not that they are Jews and they are Gentiles.

What we can take from this story is the question about the Spirit's transformation – how are we as a community going to continue to follow the Holy Spirit and be on the side of the outsider? What kind of transformation is the Spirit calling us to?

However long they sat in this Council, their decision completely overturned the way that community of believers would be for the rest of time.

I love that eating together was their sticking point – we have to have rules so we can all be together. Not, have rules to keep us apart.

This congregation has been on a journey as a multicultural church. As we continue our journey that started years back, may we be lifted up by the Spirit's encouragement.

May we always remember who we are – that we are a house of prayer for all people. May we seek justice for all people, fighting inequality and celebrating our differences as a community. May radical hospitality be our practice, following the Spirit's lead even when it is difficult or unpopular.

May it be so among us. Amen.