

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Acts 15:1-18

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.” 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. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. 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. 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.” The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 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. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 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? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” 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. When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’— things known from long ago.

When Everything Changes

This past Friday, the Women’s Guild had a program featuring a visiting speaker from Crystal Lake Garden Shops, speaking on the fine spring topic of container gardens. As I walked into Allerton Hall, the program well underway. Garden Shop owner Mike Paduch was busy talking, joking, lifting up various plants from his large display on a rectangular Allerton Hall table, extolling each plants virtues, and eventually potting them in various artistic combinations. At the end of the program, someone asked him if he would pray. He gave the most lovely response, first speaking of the beauty of nature, all this color, variety, texture, telling us we know by this our lives are not meant to be dull, or drab, or joyless. He spoke of God being in all this, gesturing to the varied foliage and then prayed a most expressive, exuberant lovely prayer.

I was struck by two things. First, how much this man loved his work! And second, how un-flummoxed, how unperturbed he was by change -- for again and again, as

part of his presentation, he'd lift up a plant, telling you what it used to be like, and how now, plant breeders had worked to come up with something larger, stronger, more adaptable, better – see?

His delight in new varieties was part of what made his presentation so fun. And the preacher, knowing the sermon today would surely be something about change, took notice.

A church is many things. A place of worship, community, reflection, service and action. It is also a place where people bring the stuff of their lives, often having to do with the considerable challenges of transition and change.

A young couple, newly married, are learning about what it is to be two people together – it has its joy, and also its rough patches. A woman, newly retired, is full of wonder as to what life will be now without the structure, the routine of her job. Parents preparing for their first child to go to college – a new chapter for everyone. And always in a faith community we are mindful of so many people who've experienced deep loss, having to live new and different lives without someone they love at their side.

Then there are times the faith community itself is changing. In the passage Marylyn just read, we can hear that tension. What will the faith community be, what will the faith be, if people don't follow the rules given to Moses? It is not that the Pharisees were hateful people, bent on keeping other people out. It is just that what had been important, meaning making to them had been the tradition. Circumcision was an identity issue – what it meant to be *faithful* was to follow certain ways, particular practices.

By the way, yesterday Marylyn Colburn, our worship leader, approached me. Am I really reading a passage on *circumcision* for Mother's Day? she asked. Yes, I said. I am a preacher always looking for a challenge, I said. (No seriously-- I did not choose this for today - it is the set passage for today in the new lectionary I am following, the narrative lectionary.)

So there was early in the church argument, dissension. Some people have no stomach for it, but sometimes it is just part of church life. And the writer of Acts, the same writer we believe as the gospel of Luke, felt this tension, this issue, was important enough that it ought to be included, written down, and passed along. As with any tension, as in any time the church wrestles with proposed change, there is a lot at stake: Who has power? Who calls the shots? What is the role of tradition? And what are we losing, or gaining, in the midst of this change?

In bible study this week we quickly got into conversation about how change is tough, maybe especially in the church which among other things, often celebrates tradition. Someone lifted up a cartoon they'd seen recently. A couple stands by

another couple sitting in a church pew. "Welcome to our church," they say. "But we wish to inform you are sitting in our family pew." We laugh because we see the folly. We want new people, yes, but people who understand how things are done around here, people who won't ask us to change too much.

Now I have to say I don't think we are a lot like that. I've had people say they've met a warm welcome here. We don't have family pews, with plaques designating rightful "sit-ees" and we don't act like we have the right to ask someone to move if they sit where we usually do. But we know the tension between old and new, yes we do. We talked about how we didn't use to always have a cross up there, here at the front of our sanctuary. It came about in 1957, I learned, when Reverend Anthony shared that many of the returning world war two vets wanted it. Some people actually left the church over the cross. It felt like a radical departure to them. It was "too Catholic" they said.

I think of how when I got here there was some tension about children being present in worship, and particularly at the sacrament of communion. People worried they, the kids, didn't understand the sacrament enough. They worried they wouldn't be quiet enough. Now we pause before we begin the invitation to the table – as children return from Allerton Hall to the pews, finding their family, or sitting together with Jenny. It doesn't interrupt us as much as it *reconstitutes* us. The kids join us quite naturally, quite happily – a reminder to us of the great inclusive quality of Jesus welcome meal.

And here it is Mother's Day. For many years, I didn't think very much about Mother's Day. I certainly wasn't getting breakfast in bed, because it was Sunday, for goodness sake, and Mike and I were always up way before the kids, there always being that sermon needing final touching up. I was of the school that didn't focus on Mother's Day in sermons, since I wasn't following the Hallmark lectionary, thank you very much. But after church, well, then Mothers Day was about *my* mother, the woman who'd nurtured my brothers and I, and about finding some way, however humble, of expressing our gratitude. Then, like many of you here in this sanctuary, my mother became one of the dearly departed. And Mother's Day completely changed.

Now, I, who really would rather live in my head, found myself filled with longing and grief. And I found that the result of this unbidden and mostly unwelcome change in life was not only had the day changed, but I am changed. I now enter this day much more aware of all the myriad of emotions that are felt on this day of days. I enter this day feeling a heart of compassion for those who miss loved ones. Much more than having the right card, or the right present, I now know this is a day to be tender and kind with one another.

Change comes to us. Over and over it comes. A new chapter in life brings new demands and, often, a realigning of family dynamics. Now, on Mothers Day, my brothers do something they never did before. They call me to say Happy Mothers Day, or something like that. We connect in our remembrance of Mom, and if I am

still weirded out that at my age I should be the matriarch of the family, well, they are at least walking with me in this strange new time. Change comes, and we adapt. What choice do we really have?

How we navigate our way through change says a lot about who we are. I was once at a funeral for a man in his eighties. His son spoke of his father being his hero. His dad had let go of his business when his mother was ill, in order to care for her. When she died, he moved from New Jersey to Massachusetts leaving friends, his church so as to live near his two children. My father was my hero, this son said, because he was so adaptable. Maybe that is the secret of life, to be able to adapt.

So here's what I think. The book of Acts includes this chapter of church life, this controversy, to remind us that our task in life is to be more than managers. Our task is to read the signs of the times, to discern, to address the possibility of needed change unafraid. In the scripture lesson today we hear how both Peter and James share their experience, their understanding, their sense of what the Spirit is revealing in the desire of Gentiles to be part of Christ's followers. Likewise, for us, "We need to be people of bold vision, who know what's at stake in our arguments, and who argue with clarity and courage" (Interpretation, William Willimon, Acts, p. 130)

Notice, however, in their persuasion, Peter and James don't insult those who think differently. They do ask a pointed question: why would anyone want to put a burden or a barrier on those who want also to be followers of Jesus? Their clear speech helped the community come to terms with change, so that the fact that some believers would now be circumcised and others would not did not feel like it was threatening to denigrate or disparage all that was valuable of the past.

There can be heartache in change. But there's heartache too in refusing to change. Our organist Michael Eaton tells me that the Roche Organ company, his other place of employment, averages two phone calls *a month* from churches of all denominations who are closing up shop, asking if they, his company, can offer assistance in selling the church's organ. Our church is so far from this. We seem to be adapting well. And yet...well, we know the millennials, the people of my children's age, have little use for the church. They see it as rigid, as intolerant, as disengaged from the world. What will make them want to become part of the church, if this is what they think of us?

Last night, in the rough draft of this sermon I launched from here into more of this -- a series of probing, challenging questions about the future of the church. I am not -- here you can breathe a great sigh of relief -- going to burden you with that today. Suffice it to say that I intend to read and research about this this summer, when I have some study leave time. See, the millennials don't just challenge the church, they challenge me as a preacher. They ask for reflection that is more dialogic, they have suspicions, you see, about the usefulness of one person standing before others as we

preachers tend to do. They yearn for more multiplicity of voices. I will get back to you on this, I promise.

I don't know if the church will ever exhibit the pure unbridled joy in change that the flower guy possessed. I do know that part of what it means to be a faith community is to face change unafraid. Perhaps it is this reality as much as anything that reminds us that we are not, by name, The Church of the Pilgrims, a fixed, static thing, but rather the Church of the Pilgrimage something fluid, ongoing. Our lives always involve change and adaptation.

The church's hope and consolation is that. We can be honest here. We can name with one another the changes we face. Things that are daunting for us.

Our hope is also this – an affirmation:
God,
a God of love
will journey with us in all of it.

Amen.