

Fifth Sunday after Easter

May 14, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Luke 2: 29-32; Acts 15: 1- 20

Grace to you and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

They're classic Momism: "So, if everyone jumped off a cliff, would you jump, too?" "You keep rolling those eyes and they're going to get stuck one day." "I'm warning you. If you fall out of that tree and break both your legs, don't come running to me!" We laugh at them but then find the same words flying out of our mouths to our own children. Why? Because beneath these Mom-isms are love and wisdom. And the one I remember most from my Mom is, "If you don't have anything nice to say then, don't say anything at all." But after a few decades of experience, I'm thinking there should be an addendum, "If you can't say something nicely, then don't say anything at all." By nicely, I don't mean eloquently or profoundly. I mean whenever we speak to another, especially those with whom we differ, we should speak with genuine respect, openness and compassion. In civil and church arenas, it can mean the difference between divisive fights-to-the-death and discernment that is messy but seeks what is best and life-giving for the community.

We all know the church is not exempt from disagreements that have grown into full-blown fights. In my lifetime, I've heard churches argue over worship styles, segregation, how often communion is celebrated, divorce, women clergy, sexual orientation and relationships between denominations. I've also heard of individual churches who have argued over worship times, music preferences, flowers, the color of rugs, and room deodorizers. One pastor tells of a woman in his church who was so distraught about the color chosen for the pew cushions that she brought her own lawn chair to sit in during worship. Some of these disagreements may seem silly to us, but we also know that even the smallest of rumbling can be potentially explosive. On the other hand, disputes properly addressed aren't always bad.

They can lead to some important new insights and understandings. What the Lord has put before us in the fifteenth chapter of Acts is a good pathway through the minefield of disagreement within the Body of Christ.

The church fight that happened in Acts 15 began in the local church of Antioch. Paul and Saul had seen a great response to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ among the Gentiles — the non-Jews. Many of the gentiles had come to believe and be baptized. But some other visiting missionaries began to preach that the gentiles could not be truly saved without first being circumcised and joining in the practice of the other laws and customs of Judaism. In other words, “You cannot be a Christian unless you first become a Jew. If you don't accept the law, Christ will not accept you!” This was not a minor thing. What was being questioned was the very way people were saved for an eternity with God. Is the grace of God in Christ enough for one's salvation or must the Law of Moses be added? The next question that flowed out of this controversy was how do we go about discerning the will of God?

What the local church community at Antioch does with this serious disagreement is important. “The Antioch church doesn't go rogue; they don't wash their hands of the [larger] Jerusalem church”¹ from which their church had its start. Instead, the Antioch church sends a delegation to Jerusalem. They send key leaders, Paul and Barnabas, among others.” When they arrive, the apostles and the elders welcome them. There's a mutual respect. The mother church doesn't say, “Oh brother! Here comes trouble!” They welcomed them, and they called a meeting to order to discuss the matter. In good rabbinic style, they began to debate, speaking and listening. Peter stands to add his understanding from his own experience of seeing the Holy Spirit come upon gentiles, like Cornelius and his household just like the Spirit had come upon the original, Jewish disciples. “God didn't make a distinction between Jew and Gentile, therefore, should we?” Peter asks, “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?"

The discussion isn't stopped or decided because a major leader spoke. There was silence for reflection. Paul and Barnabas share their own experiences of God's work among the gentiles. Then another church leader, James, adds how he sees Scripture speaking to this question. He shares words from the prophet Amos that speak of God seeking all people, even the gentiles. Finally, a proposal is made. They do not vote but trust God has been directing their prayerful discussion, their searching in scriptures and their shared experiences and observation about God's work and movement in and among them. A letter would be sent to the church of Antioch, saying, "God's Grace is enough!" With one caveat: *Please abstain from eating meat offered to idols, unkosher food, and from fornication and immorality. In other words, please respect [the traditions of your fellow Jewish-Christian believers.] Don't abuse your freedom by intentionally offending others, lest you look more like a pagan than a disciple.* And they sent the letter, with representatives from Jerusalem to encourage them. And there was unity and there was joy! In Antioch and in Jerusalem."² This is an amazing and instructive episode from our church's history.

I recently read an author who described writing a novel like "driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."³ We cannot see the complete direction and pathways of our church on its way to the ends of the earth and time. We can only see as far as the headlights God provides — 1) a community united in Christ 2) who discern through "conversation in which both 3) Holy Scripture and 4) human experiences"⁴ of God are heard and considered. The early church did not go off a cliff or crash when they hit this major controversy. Through the grace of God, they met, discussed

and discerned in the light God provided. The church's witness remained united and ready to bring their gospel witness down the next stretch of road where God would lead them. The future of the church is in God's hands. But our part is to "recognize where the Holy Spirit is moving and to try to keep up."⁵

My first Sunday back in the pulpit after quite a few weeks and I'm in awe of what God has put together among us today. This scripture passage was placed on the calendar last September. The prayers prepared for this day and scripture were prepared by pastors at ClergyStuff.com six months ago. The hymns for today were chosen in early April. The Worship Team had chosen this day to share its summer worship proposal based on when the survey could be completed and the Team meet for discussion. If you have any thoughts that the worship team or I intentionally planned this intersection of scripture, prayers and summer worship, you are mistaken. I didn't even realize it until I sat last Monday to prepare for this week's Bible Study and sermon.

This is a God thing, a "God sighting." This is one of those experiences of God at work among us. It is not about whether those who wish to worship inside or outside this summer are right or wrong. It is not about whether summer worship in the parlor or the sanctuary is correct. It's not even about whether there should or should not be a different style or worship for three months. This Scripture and our experience of it on this day, is about whether we will let our difference of opinions divide us... whether we will let our difference of opinions get in the way of worshiping God and loving one another. What I hear from today's scripture and my experience of God at work here among us today, is this: No matter where you stand on summer worship, let us agree to stand united in Christ and loving toward those who agree or disagree with us and curious about what God may be up to at Haven.

When it came to disagreements in the church, “John Wesley had a good rule of thumb. He said, ‘In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.’ This is what happened at the Council of Jerusalem — salvation by the grace of God was essential; continuing to follow Jewish laws and dietary codes was not essential; and during and after the Council, listening, respecting and honoring each other as brothers or sisters in Christ was non-negotiable. Like the early church, we may not be able to see too far down the road. We may each have preferences that will rub against someone else’s preference. But, with our eyes on Jesus, God can show us the way to carry God’s good news and love to the ends of the earth. United together in Christ, practicing Jesus’ kind of love, there is no limits to what God can do at Haven and what we could do for God’s redeeming work in the world. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 5/13/17

ENDNOTES

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1. The Rev. Dr. Davis Chappell, “Good Church Fight” June 10, 2012 As posted on Day1.org
 2. The Rev. Dr. Davis Chappell, “Good Church Fight” June 10, 2012 As posted on Day1.org
 3. In her commentary on Acts 15: 1-18, Mary Hinkle Shore (posted on www.workingpreacher.org) notes that Anne Lamott([Bird by Bird: Some Thoughts on Writing and Life](#) recalls this quote attributed to E.L. Doctorow
 4. Mary Hinkle Shore, “Commentary on Acts 15: 1-20” as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 5. The Rev. Pendleton Peery, “The Holy Spirit as a Pre-Existing Condition,” May 13, 2012