

Sermon – May 26, 2024
“They rejoiced at the exhortation”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 15:6-19

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads us to life eternal and fruitful labor as we abide in you and labor on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! We are moving back into the Book of Acts for the summer. Some will recall that we spent time in Acts last year. In fact, we went through the first fourteen chapters of Acts and then stopped and journeyed together through Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Today we are moving back into Acts again. We are back with the early church as they live out Jesus’ command to them. Anyone remember what that was? I will give us a hint: it was Acts 1:8. Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, his last instructions to his disciples were “ ... you will receive power when Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”¹ We have one job, to be Jesus’ witnesses starting right here and going out wherever we are led towards the ends of the earth. We are all to be part of Jesus’ mission to all people, following him every day into the ripe harvest on his mission fields.

I will not recap all of Acts 1-14 this morning. A summary for last summer I will share is that we witnessed the disciples receive Holy Spirit at Pentecost (which we revisited last week) and then moved through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and out to the ends of the earth sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, and we still have the second half of the Acts of the Apostles to explore this summer and into the fall. Let me encourage us to read the Book of Acts this summer. My goal is to preach one sermon from each chapter, starting this morning with chapter 15. To help us learn more about the Book of Acts, Seedbed, through one JD Walt, sower-in-chief at Seedbed, is also working through the last 14 chapters of Acts on the Seedbed Wake-Up Call. Let me encourage you, if you have not, to join Seedbed and to listen to the Wake-Up Call each morning. You will also get to sing a hymn of praise each morning and to hear Holy Spirit stories, examples of how Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives. Sign up is easy: go to Seedbed.com and put in your email address, and each morning you will get a Wake-Up Call from Seedbed.

Let us turn now to Acts chapter 15 and let me fill in a few gaps by explaining some of what is going on in this chapter. Let me also share that Acts chapter 15 documents one of the key moments in the life of the Church. I put the Gospels in a class by themselves as they teach us about Jesus. They are the teachings of Jesus that were written down for us by the apostles. But in this morning's reading, we arrive at a, if not *the*, key moment in the history of the Church. Some scholars claim that chapter 15 documents the key moment in the New Testament, second only to the cross.

Let me provide a little context. Paul is out on one of his mission trips and is working in the city of Antioch about 250 miles from Jerusalem. Teachers of Christ from Jerusalem, and we can think from the Pharisees, have come to Antioch and have been teaching that in order to be saved one needs to be circumcised and keep the Law. Paul does not teach this concept; he teaches that we are saved by faith through grace by Jesus and have freedom from the yoke of the Law. Paul and these teachers have had large, long, and probably heated debates in Antioch about this teaching, and the church in Antioch has sent Paul and Barnabus to Jerusalem to get a ruling on what is the correct doctrine. In Acts 15 we find our first disagreement over the doctrine of the Church. There is disagreement over what is necessary for salvation and how we are to live as followers of Jesus. Part of the background we need to help us understand the disagreement is that to this point in church history, Christianity has been rooted in Jerusalem with the clear majority of its members being Jews who keep the Law. But, as Paul and other followers of Jesus continue

to move through the Gentile world, the number of Gentile believers is growing rapidly and these two groups of people, the Jews and the Gentiles, are seeking a way to live together as brothers and sisters in the in-breaking kingdom of God. Also at stake is the idea of where the center of Christianity will be located—in Jerusalem among the Jews or in some other place among the Gentiles, possibly Rome.

Now I am certain that none of us can think of any topics that Christians have differing opinions about today. What is happening in Acts 15 is that the body of Christ is in danger of losing its unity around fundamental ideas of how to follow Jesus, and they turn to the leaders of the Church for clear guidance on the issue and for guidance on how to live as brothers and sisters in Christ. Acts 15 brings us into the first council of the Church. There will be others to follow over the years on other key topics, but this is the first. I think of this as the Pharisee Christians, or Jewish Christians, vs. Paul and the Gentile Christian world.

We should note that these two groups gather before the leaders of the Church. Peter is there representing the apostles, James is there as an elder in the Church, and Paul and Barnabas are there to bring their experiences from their mission work among the Gentiles before the council. The Pharisee Christians make their case that for a Gentile to be saved, he must be circumcised and keep the entire Law. To become a Jew this would be the approach. A convert to Judaism would need to meet these requirements and so the Pharisee voice is claiming that to be saved, one has to keep the Law. They hold that being a Jew is a requirement to be a Christ follower. Paul, after his Damascus Road experience, understands being a follower of Jesus differently and holds that faith in Jesus is sufficient and that those who receive grace are freed from the Law. Keep in mind that most of the Law being referred to here has to do with how a Jew and a Gentile could sit down at the table and eat a fellowship meal together including Communion. The Jews could not eat with the Gentiles due to the food law restrictions, but they are in the kingdom of God and want to be unified in Christ, which includes receiving the Lord's Supper together with Gentile believers. In the debate, we hear Peter share that when he spoke to the Gentiles, referring to Cornelius and his family, that before they confessed with their lips, before they were baptized, before they expressed publicly their faith in Jesus, God witnessed to their belief in Jesus by giving the Gentiles Holy Spirit just as Holy Spirit was given to the apostles and other disciples at Pentecost. God knows the hearts of people and demonstrated their belief in Jesus by giving them Holy Spirit when their hearts believed in Jesus. When we think of

Peter speaking here, think of his voice as the apostolic teaching, the teaching found in the Gospels, the knowledge of those who walked with Jesus speaking into the debate. Peter's appearance at the debate will be Peter's last appearance in Acts as he will fade from Luke's account after this council and Paul will have the stage. Paul and Barnabus share their experiences among the Gentiles and share all of the signs and wonders God has worked through them as they have shared the Gospel with Gentiles. We don't know how long the discussion and debate were as Luke does not have our sense of time, but we do see the opposing sides speak. Listen to each other, and seek with open hearts to share their thoughts. At some point in the discussion, James speaks up. The James speaking is not one of the apostles, but is "James the Just," one of Jesus' brothers who came to believe in Jesus most likely through a resurrection appearance.ⁱⁱ James looks to the Old Testament prophet Amos and finds in God's word given through Amos the prophecy that God will not only restore the tent of David but will bring into the kingdom of God all the Gentiles over whom [God's] name has been called. With that guidance from God's word, James makes a decision and gives a ruling on the matter, clearly telling those listening that what is required for salvation is Jesus + nothing. If we don't take anything else away from Acts 15, write down that salvation is Jesus + nothing. If we find ourselves in a congregation and are being taught that we have to have an experience, do something, or learn something to receive salvation, then we need to move to a place where it is understood that salvation is Jesus + nothing. Jesus did all that was required for our salvation. We are saved through faith in grace by Jesus.

Now we might wonder if James understands that salvation is Jesus + nothing because he gives rules that he has written down and sent to the church at Antioch for them to abide by. Good question. I am glad you asked. James has affirmed what Paul teaches but also understands that Jews and Gentiles need to have a means to be unified in Christ. The Jews, those who follow the Law, keep the food laws while the Gentiles are not bound by them, but James wants to have unity between these two groups and so he gives fundamental direction that allows these two groups to come together and be in fellowship with each other. James' direction gives the early Church a means for these two groups to live as brothers and sisters in Christ. James' direction for the Church allows these two groups to be united in Christ. It is a key direction for the Church. In the chapters ahead of us, we will see Paul live out the guidance as he will become all things to all people that some might be won to Christ. Paul will be a Jew for the Jews and will be a Gentile for the Gentiles.

Don't listen to James' guidance and decide that the decision of the first council of the church frees us to do whatever we want as Christians. It does not. Holy Spirit is given to us to guide us into all truth, to lead us into life in Jesus that is holy. Remember our one job? We are to be Spirit-filled people led into holiness, who are following Jesus and living as he lived. We are people with one job. We are to be those who present the Gospel with our arms open wide to allow people to also experience Jesus no matter where they or we are. We are to be those who will follow Jesus into his mission to all people and share with them the Good News and allow Jesus to transform those with whom we share the Gospel into his image, into their true self.

When our kids were very young, we had a tradition that at bedtime the girls could ask for a story and I would tell them one. I like stories and like to tell them as well. During one of our family walks, our black lab decided to run off, leaving us behind. She disappeared into the woods and did not respond to our calls. We searched for her for a long time that afternoon and there were some long faces around the dinner table that evening as the dog was not found and had not come back. When the girls went to bed that evening, they were still upset. Not too long after they were asleep, a very muddy, happy, and tired black lab showed up at the house. I turned that lost dog and her return event into a little story the next evening and ended up telling that story over and over again. The girls never seemed to get tired of hearing it. I got tired of telling it but for some reason they really wanted to hear it over and over again. Our job is to tell Jesus' story to people. My job as your pastor is to help us grow into a church, the body of Christ, that is telling Jesus' story, a story that never grows old, and we should all love to tell it over and over even to those who know it best. Our struggle is that we may not know Jesus' story. We may be familiar with it, but we may have parts of it confused or maybe we are not confident in our knowledge of the Gospel, and consequently we are not comfortable telling Jesus' story. We might need to have help sorting out things that have crept into our understanding of Jesus' story that are not part of it, and we might need to learn parts that are in it so that we can clearly tell the story, the Gospel, to others. My hope is that we will all come to be great and eager storytellers who tell Jesus' story all the time in all the places we can to all the people we can. This morning, I want to share an example of telling Jesus' story that JD Walt came up with at Seedbed. The story is told by a group of people all telling part of the story. So, sit back, listen, and be encouraged as we begin to learn to tell this old, old story of Jesus and his love.

Present the Gospel video from Seedbed.

Let us all encourage each other to wake up and rise from the dead so that Christ might shine on us. We have one job to do for Jesus: present the Gospel, as we live as those who are saved by faith through grace. People, get ready to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Pray with me. Jesus, we thank you that we are a people who have heard the good news, have received Holy Spirit, and are seeking to follow you into your mission to all people. Jesus, teach us the Gospel and help us to love others enough to share it with them. Teach us, Jesus, to tell your story to those who have never heard it and to those who know it best. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Go forth into Jesus' mission and tell his story. Amen

ⁱ NRSV Acts 1:8 Kindle Version

ⁱⁱ Stott, John. The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.