

Prepared by Pastor Sarah Sanderson-Doughty for St. Andrew's Presbyterian, Portland, OR

15 Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we’ve received from Moses, you can’t be saved.” 2 Paul and Barnabas took sides against these Judeans and argued strongly against their position.

The church at Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and several others from Antioch to go up to Jerusalem to set this question before the apostles and the elders. 3 The church sent this delegation on their way. They traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling stories about the conversion of the Gentiles to everyone. Their reports thrilled the brothers and sisters. 4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed them. They gave a full report of what God had accomplished through their activity. 5 Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, “The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses.”

6 The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. 7 After much debate, Peter stood and addressed them, “Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. 8 God, who knows people’s deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. 10 Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? 11 On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus.”

12 The entire assembly fell quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through their activity. 13 When Barnabas and Paul also fell silent, James responded, “Fellow believers, listen to me. 14 Simon reported how, in his kindness, God came to the Gentiles in the first place, to raise up from them a people of God. 15 The prophets’ words agree with this; as it is written,

16 After this I will return,
and I will rebuild David’s fallen tent;
I will rebuild what has been torn down.
I will restore it

17 so that the rest of humanity will seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who belong to me.

The Lord says this, the one who does these things[a]

18 known from earliest times.

19 “Therefore, I conclude that we shouldn’t create problems for Gentiles who turn to God. 20 Instead, we should write a letter, telling them to avoid the pollution associated with idols, sexual immorality, eating meat from strangled animals, and consuming blood. 21 After all, Moses has been proclaimed in every city for a long time, and is read aloud every Sabbath in every synagogue.” **-Common English Bible**

Some of you might be aware that I served on the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the church for our national church starting in my last year of seminary and

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through the first five years of my ordained pastoral ministry. Most of you are scratching your heads— “Theological Task Force?” “Peace, Unity, and Purity?” “What Presbyterian silliness is this?” Well, let me tell you. 20 Presbyterians from all over the nation, representing virtually every demographic in the denomination, and every discipline in the theological academy, and more specifically, every ideological and political stance— were chosen by three previous moderators of the General Assembly— to help to offer the church a process and an instrument by which we might live into our peace, unity, and purity. I know some of you are very puzzled by these three terms, from which we got our nickname— the PUP task force. Everyone ordained— pastors, elders, deacons— we all vow to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church. Several of you have made that commitment! That’s where the title came from, from that vow. And... when we were assembled in 2001, a question about ordination, in particular the ordination of those in same gender sexual relationships, had been disturbing the peace and unity, and some would say purity, of the church since the year I was born (1976, if you’re wondering). One of the people responsible for getting a provision in our constitution that explicitly forbid the ordination of anyone not chaste in singleness or faithful in marriage between one man and one woman was on our task force alongside several leaders of organizations fighting hard to get that provision OUT of our constitution, and an openly gay man who had set aside his ordination years before. We had bonafide conservatives and card-carrying liberals, and surely many moderates. The moderators who appointed us said that after they released the list of task force members they braced themselves for the onslaught of criticism— too liberal, too conservative. Such criticism never came. By God’s grace they got the balance right. We were a representative body of our wounded and struggling church.

What we did over the course of 5 years is too much to report today, but what we ended up doing... this I want to share. First, we unanimously approved our final report. This felt like a miracle, a true act of God’s living and present Spirit. I KNEW these people and and I KNEW how different we were and I KNEW most positions had not changed over the course of our work together... I did NOT know that we could or would be able to say anything in one voice. And yet... we did. We offered the church six recommendations, the first four of which were non-controversial, and frankly less memorable— they were recommendations about process, and decision-making practices— ways of being together that we had experienced to be

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furthering of peace, unity, and purity. The last two, however, were deeply controversial. Recommendation five was an authoritative interpretation of the constitution that made it possible to legally ordain those who depart from the standards of the church (at that time this was inclusive of fidelity and chastity). The mechanics of this are probably more than you are interested in hearing this morning, but please stay in the main room and ask about it if you're curious. Recommendation six was a recommendation that our ordination standards NOT be changed for at least two years to allow the church time to live into the process outlined in recommendation 5. Ultimately recommendation 5 made conservatives in the church very upset and recommendation 6 made progressives in the church very upset. But the crazy thing is that recommendation 5, the one that upset the conservatives, was largely crafted by conservatives on our task force. And recommendation six, the one that upset the progressives, was a generous offer from progressives to conservatives. And truly, I didn't know until we took our final vote, how it would turn out. But all were agreed that this compromise was the next right thing for our church. We received the gift of peace, unity, and purity by God's grace through our faithful work together.

Perhaps you're already making connections to our reading from Acts this morning. An intense controversy arose in the early church over whether Gentiles essentially had to become Jewish in order to be Christian. It's framed as a battle over circumcision, but it was about more than this visible mark of Jewish identity. It was about the law— how much of the law would followers of Jesus keep? Circumcision was a symbol of commitment to this law. We can certainly understand adult believers not wishing to subject themselves to the painful practice of circumcision— probably babies would object, had they words to do so. And we can also understand a hesitancy to commit to following all 613 commands or mitzvot in the Torah. Many contemporary Jews have a loose relationship to the mitzvot. And certainly we Christians do... we struggle with the ten big ones, and even, sometimes, with Jesus' distillation of those ten to one— LOVE. But there are some believers, probably in every religious tradition, who are very attached to laws and regulations, and think these essential to identity and faithfulness. And particularly for Jews, who have been so oppressed throughout history, all practices which maintain their clear continuity with the covenant identity are precious. Any loosening of

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commitment to God's law could feel... threatening, particularly in the midst of an empire that is not is particularly hospitable to faith in the God of Israel.

The thing is... God's Spirit sometimes, oftentimes, seems unconcerned about God's law. God's Spirit moves in the lives of people who are not at all faithful to God's law, changing hearts and minds, but not necessarily compelling adherence to any particular mitzvot—circumcision, for example, or keeping kosher, or fidelity and chastity. God undeniably and powerfully works through people who seem way beyond God's reach— over and over and over again this has happened. It is testified to in scripture. And in our modern world.

Paul and Barnabas were ministering in Gentile territory. They tried preaching the Gospel in synagogues but didn't have much luck with a number of faithful Jews. But Gentile God worshippers, or Gentiles more broadly... many were enthusiastically receiving their ministry and evidently receiving the Spirit... whenever this happened... apostles and disciples would baptize them, welcoming them into the new movement of Jesus followers, now we would say, welcoming them into the church. Even Peter, a leader among the Apostles based in Jerusalem, has witnessed the Spirit's presence in Gentiles and chosen to baptize them, after being prompted by a bizarre vision to loosen his attachment to the law. I don't think anyone was objecting to the Baptism of Gentiles at this point, all were in awe of the Spirit's work and sought to be aligned with it. But some thought that more should be asked of those joining the fellowship— in particular full commitment to the law, the Torah. They thought, in fact, that salvation depended on faithfulness to this law. And Paul and Barnabas were fiercely opposed to this. It is not that they had no respect for the law, Paul was a bonafide Pharisee after all. It was that they believed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus had opened salvation by grace through faith, not through perfect works or obedience to the law. They believed Jesus does the saving; we don't save ourselves. They believed the gift of the Spirit confirmed their interpretation. And they did not believe Gentiles should be expected to be circumcised, or perhaps to be held to the law more broadly speaking.

The debate in Antioch was intense and the church there didn't know what to do. So they sent a delegation to Jerusalem to put the question to the Apostles and Elders and seek a resolution to this intractable conflict. Paul, Barnabas, and several others went to Jerusalem. All along the way they told the story of what had been happening by God's Spirit through their

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ministry. And everyone was in awe of their testimony. When they arrived in Jerusalem they were welcomed and the Apostles and Elders listened to their testimony of all that God was accomplishing through their ministry. And then the opposite perspective was presented. And then an intense debate unfolded. We don't know what was said... but we can gather that it was variations on the themes of law and grace. Then Peter speaks, reminding them of his ministry to Gentiles and the insight he had gained that God makes no distinction between people, arguing that it wasn't fair to ask Gentiles to take on a burden that was too heavy for Jews and always had been. Then Paul and Barnabas testified to the signs and wonders unfolding among the Gentiles and the assembly listened in quiet stillness. And then James, believed to be the brother of Jesus, offers a ruling. He is convinced that God, in God's kindness, has welcomed Gentiles into the covenant and believes this has always been God's intention as is evidenced in prophetic speech. He wished not to make problems for Gentile believers. But it is evident he also wished to honor Jewish believers, because his final recommendation is a compromise. No circumcision, and nowhere near 613 mitzvot, but four behavioral expectations—four things to avoid— the pollution associated with idols, sexual immorality, eating meat from strangled animals, and consuming blood.

This was a balance of law and grace, not a win, per se, for either polarized side in the church, but a win for the church— a way forward together— that honored all the believers— those for whom Jewish practice was essential and those for whom it was foreign. It was asking believers to make space for each other and to honor each other. And it carried the day. I know some in our fellowship today find this a deeply unsatisfying resolution to the conflict. Some think that grace should mean total freedom from the law. But Jesus said he came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. And Jesus distilled the law into the giant and demanding command to love— and decisions that make space for diverse belief and understanding— these seem to be deeply faithful manifestations of love.

Goodness knows that in our context such collaborative compromise is hard to come by. As a nation we are so deeply polarized that even public health measures are political flashpoints. Our Congress is finding ways to act that don't require bi-partisan agreement. Our State Legislature has been repeatedly stymied by walkouts. If we, as a church, manage our conflicts differently— making space for each other, listening to each other, making decisions

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that honor each other— this is a powerful witness to our divided world, a witness to the true difference that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus makes. It requires humility— a loosening of our attachment to various pure and righteous positions— and, believe me, we all have pure and righteous positions on something, maybe even on several things— it requires an investment in relationships. It requires a willingness to share our passionate commitments and understandings, and listen to, with a desire to understand, the passionate commitments and understandings of those who think differently than you. It requires a willingness to offer gifts to those with whom we disagree, and receive gifts from those with whom we disagree.

I'm telling you, it's possible. I've experienced it. I'd like to say that the work of our task force settled all the controversies and blessed the Presbyterian Church (USA) with peace, unity, and purity. But some were so upset with our authoritative interpretation that they started a new Presbyterian denomination. And some were so upset with our call to leave the standards alone for a spell that they left for other ecclesial fellowships who were further progressed on the inclusivity spectrum. But... I will say that in the 15 years since our report, though we have lost congregations and members, our national church has changed our standards, no more fidelity and chastity requirement, and increasingly broadened our welcome. And it is possible for those who are not comfortable with or are deeply opposed to our current open stance on ordination and marriage to be honest about that and still serve our church, though the authoritative interpretation our task force offered. The standards have changed, but the guidance about the application of standards has not. No one's conscience is bound. There's space for all of us in our church.

Let's watch for the movement of the Spirit and seek to be led by it... beyond our assumptions and limitations, beyond our rules and regulations, deeper into authentic love. And let's awe the world with a witness to what God is doing in and through us.

This sermon was influenced by the following podcasts:

Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker. *Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary Podcast*. "NL Podcast 453: Council at Jerusalem, May 2, 2021." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/nl-podcast-453-council-at-jerusalem-may-2-2021>

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. *The Bible Worm Podcast*. "Episode 237: The Council at Jerusalem, Acts 15:1-21." <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-237-the-council-at-jerusalem-acts-151-21/>The final report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church can be found here: https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf

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