

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Decision-making at Church"

Scripture: Acts 15:1-21, Luke 2:25-32

Hymns: How firm a foundation 685 (1-3,5), Breath on me, breath of God 389, Faith of our Mothers (insert), Thy word 1984, I Believe 2012, Teach me your way, O Lord, Step by step 1991

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Mother's Day

May 14, 2017

Rev. Steve Filyk

A week and a half ago

I was returning from a Session meeting at the church,
To my home on Mount Dufferin.

As I drove past Home Depot on Hillside Drive

I ran into some light fog,
Which as I climbed grew thicker and thicker.

By now I am quite familiar with the territory,

But under that grey blanket
The landscape looked eerie and strange.

If it had not been for my headlights

And the illumination that they provided
I would have driven right past my turnoff.

I almost missed it...

But was able to hit the breaks
And make a hard right
Three-quarters the way through the intersection.

Veteran drivers know that travelling in the fog can be difficult.

It can be especially difficult

when you're off the beaten track
Heading down an unfamiliar road.

But with a good set of headlights

And an easy foot on the pedal

You can get to a distant destination

Even if you can only see a little way ahead at a time.¹

PAUSE

Life in the church sometimes seems a little hazy.

Especially when the community is venturing in new directions:

Renovating the facility,
Implementing changes in worship,
Or reaching out into the community.

While there may be a strong sense of the Spirit's leading

There are always different opinions
On how things should be implemented:
Usually five opinions for every four people!

So how do we keep moving down the road?

What will illumine our way forward?

How do keep from missing turns?

And how do we stay out of the ditch?

In today's Scripture lesson,

The early church has run into some heavy fog
And has pulled over at the roadside.

As Jesus had promised, the Gospel message

IS being shared outside the Jewish nation.

And that witness **IS** effective:
gentiles are becoming followers of Christ.

Everyone in the church seems on board

With this new outreach to the Gentiles.

But some are concerned about just how these Gentiles
Are being brought into the church.

Some think they should be circumcised,

That they should adopt the law of Moses.

To some believers, the law of Moses
and the Gospel of Jesus Christ were tied together:
You needed both to be saved.ⁱⁱ

PAUSE

To most of us this all sounds pretty silly.
Yes, we see ongoing value in the law's MORAL aspects,
But keeping kosher or practising circumcision
Seems pretty antiquated and obscure.

We don't really worry so much about tradition.
Jesus is what matters here, right?

And yet how would we feel
If a neighboring church closed
And we ended up with 10 new families
From a Pentecostal community?

I'm sure there would be great joy.
Maybe even some upraised hands.

And yet as time move on there would be concerns
about the newcomers' lack of understanding,
or appreciation for our well-loved traditions:
our hymn-singing and our formal liturgy.

While few of us would demand
That these followers of Jesus need to be Presbyterian,
We might say they need to be Presbyterian
If they want to follow Jesus here!

All to say that the details of how we live out our faith
matter to most of us.

And circumcision mattered to many who were brought up
In the Jewish tradition.
I mean Jesus himself was circumcised.
It was THE sign of God's covenant with the people.ⁱⁱⁱ

So how did they work their way through this conflict?
How did they get out of this fog?

Well I can think of at least three important sources of light;
Three vital sources of illumination.
First of all, they reflected on the recent work
And activity of the Holy Spirit.

When the concerned parties gather in Jerusalem,
They spend considerable time
talking about the Holy Spirit's work.

While Peter had earlier reported to Jerusalem
about his encounter with Cornelius,
he tells the story yet again,
noting how the Holy Spirit was given to the Gentiles
without any distinctions being made.

Paul and Barnabas also speak up
Sharing additional stories of the signs and wonders
God was doing among the Gentiles.

All this is offered as evidence that
The law of Moses is an unnecessary burden:
That everyone is "saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus".^{iv}

When the early church gets into the fog,
Their experience with the Holy Spirit
Provides some helpful direction.

But there are other sources of illumination, like Scripture.
They also consider the guidance of Scripture.

Scripture is used as a rule, as a test, as a guide
To determine whether people's arguments or experiences
are in line with what has already been revealed.

After listening to the stories of Peter
 And Paul and Barnabas,
 The leader of the assembly
 turns the group's attention to Scripture.

James quotes a passage from the book of Amos.
 That speaks of the Gentiles seeking the Lord
 After God rebuilds the house of David.

That passages showcases that it was always God's intent
 To have worshippers from all nations;
 And that a way would be established
 for them to seek the Lord.

In this way, Scripture validates those experiences
 Already shared by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas,
 And puts pressure on the assembly
 To get in line with God's work.

When the early church gets into the fog,
 The Scriptures are turned to for guidance and illumination.

But today's story doesn't just reveal two headlights,
 It shows another, a third source of illumination:
 the community's concern
 for the whole body of believers.

We see this at the outset.
 Delegates are sent to Jerusalem
 To represent different sides of the issue.

It is important to the early church
 That the voices of all the concerned parties are heard.

And so we don't just hear from Peter, Paul, and Barnabas,
 But we also hear from their opponents,
 Other followers of Jesus, followers who are Pharisees.

A concern for whole body marks the debate
 And it also shapes the final decision.
 When James makes his ruling, **everybody** is asked to change.

Did you notice that?

Even as James affirms that the Gentiles should not be troubled
 By the burden of Jewish law
 He asks that they keep "the minimum requirements
 that had been set for strangers
 wanting to enjoy fellowship
 with conscientious Jews."^{vi}

[For those who are interested,
 these requirements approximate those rules
 Expected of aliens living in Israel
 As found in Leviticus 17 & 18.]

James' ruling is as follows:

"Be careful to not get involved in activities connected with idols,
 to guard the morality of sex and marriage,
 to not serve food offensive to Jewish Christians—
 blood, for instance.'

This is basic wisdom from Moses,
 preached and honored for centuries now in city after city...^{vi}

So on one hand it is affirmed
 That the Gentiles don't need the burden of the law of Moses.

And on the other hand it is recognised
 That some basic rules are necessary
 So there can be ongoing fellowship
 Among a racially diverse community.

In the end we can notice three important lights:
 The recent work and activity of the Holy Spirit,
 The guidance of Holy Scripture,
 And a concern for the entire body.

Take any of the these three away
And the community gets lost or waylaid:

They chase new dreams that are unfaithful to their heritage.
They ignore the Spirit and live out an earlier generation's calling.
OR they divide into factions and spend their energy arguing.

We've probably witnessed churches in each of these situations.
They are like cars speeding through the fog
Without headlights:
they inevitably end up in the ditch.

But the opposite **IS** possible:
Moving faithfully into the future as one united body.

This is what happens at that council in Jerusalem.

After James' ruling respected messengers are appointed
To deliver the decision to the community
In which this concern arose,
the church in Antioch.

And what was the response?
We are told that "The people were greatly relieved and pleased."^{vii}

So will we be able move faithfully into the future
As one united body, here at St. Andrew's?

I guess it is up to all of us.

If our decision-making begins and ends
in personal self-interest
Expressed in a show of hands,
Or in parking lot meetings with a few close friends

We will likely end up in a ditch
Or in the middle of no-where.

But if we use these tools, the lights,
that God has graciously given us
We will move forward in Christ's mission,
We will see God's kingdom come.

May we see that kingdom come.
Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to Mary Shore and her commentary for the image of headlights as a way into the passage. Mary Hinkle Shore "Commentary on Acts 15:1-18"
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3042

ⁱⁱ see Acts 15:1 NRSV

ⁱⁱⁱ see William H. Willimon *Acts* 128,129

^{iv} Acts 15:11

^v William H. Willimon *Acts* 130

^{vi} Acts 15:19-21 MSG

^{vii} Acts 15:30 MSG