

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Difficult Decisions

How do we make choices that keep us in the center of God's will?

Scripture: Acts 15:1-18

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May 2, 2020

Fifth Sunday after Easter

Opening Hymn: How firm a foundation 685 (1-3,5)

Closing Hymn: Be thou my vision 461

Choruses: Come, children, join to Sing 377; Step by step 1991 (next week—untitled hymn/come to Jesus)

Communion Hymn: There is a redeemer 358

The Christian church has a long history.

Over the course of its 2000 years

It has faced serious issues and made momentous decisions.

From our position in 2021

Not all of these decisions are good.

I don't want to review our entire history,

but let me share a short list

Of decision you may be familiar with.

In 325 The Council of Nicea defined the doctrine of Jesus' identity

And in 382 the Council of Rome determined the canon of Scripture.

In 1095 the First Crusade was launched by the Council of Clermont

And in 1150 the Universities of Paris and Oxford were founded.

In 1807 the British Parliament voted to abolish the slave trade

After the tireless efforts of Christian politician William Wilberforce.

In 1870 Pope Pius IX proclaimed the doctrine of Papal Infallibility.

In 1884 residential schools

were funded by the Canadian government

And run by the mainline churches.

In 1962 Vatican II opened.

In 1966 the General Assembly welcomed women

as elders and ministers.

The Christian church has made significant decisions over the centuries.

This June our own church will be making significant decisions

With regard to same-sex marriages

and the participation of sexual minorities

In church leadership.

The church continues to be faced with important issues.

The church continues to make significant decisions.

But how can we ensure the choices we make
 And the ways that we arrive at them
 Are pleasing to God?

Today's Bible reading, the account of the Jerusalem Council
 Provides us with a helpful model in answering this question.

But before we get there,
 we need to do a little catch-up.

Since Easter we have been racing through sections
 of the book of Acts.

At the outset of the book the risen Jesus
 tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses
 over an expanding geographic area.

And what Jesus promises comes to happen.

First the disciples witness to their fellows Jews in Jerusalem,
 Then to Samaritans to the north and God-fearers to the south.
 Finally their witness is brought to the Gentile community
 Both in their midst and out into Asia Minor.

In passages that we have skipped over,
 The Apostle Peter has a vision which compels him
 To witness to the gentile Centurion Cornelius.

Today's passage begins with Paul returning from his first missionary trip
 to Asia Minor where he establishes new churches among Gentiles.

But when he returns to (Syrian) Antioch Paul arrives to a controversy.
 Some Jewish Christians were teaching that Gentile converts
 Needed to be circumcised
 And to observe the law of Moses to be saved.

It is hard to understand this argument
 from our vantage point in Canada in 2021.

Nowadays circumcision is seldom practised
 for religious or medical reasons.
 And while many people are particular about food,
 Most would say it has to do with health, not religion.

But for Jews and early Jewish Christians,
 food laws and circumcision
 Was a central part of their identity.

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God gave to Abraham,
 Along with their cookbooks
 this helped them survive as a distinct people.

When Jewish followers of Jesus
 Insisted that Gentiles adopt these practises,
 It wasn't mean to exclude them, but include them
 In the covenant promises.

But if circumcision was regarded favorably by Jews,
 It was regarded as mutilation by Gentiles.ⁱ

Aside from his theological objections
 Paul could certainly envision how this would hamper
 His evangelistic efforts.

And so Paul and Barnabas head down to Jerusalem
 To seek the wisdom of the Apostles and Elders.
 A council is convened to discuss this issue
 And try to resolve this dispute.

What is clear from the record
 Is that despite conflicting view
 The discussion is civil, respectful.

Peter speaks first,
 reminding them of his own experience
 Of being sent to the Gentiles

and then witnessing the Holy Spirit
 falling on them before he finishes his sermon.

This is for him a sign that God accepts them without circumcision.
 This is for him a sign
 that they are not purified by an external mark on their body
 But by God's grace which "purified their hearts by faith."ⁱⁱ

After Peter is finished, Paul and Barnabas address the council.
 They speak about the 'signs and wonders'
 God had been working in their ministry among the Gentiles.

They speak of experiences, that in their minds
 Discount any need for the Gentiles to follow Jewish law.

At this council the church talks
 About the ways they have been seeing God working.
 God's presence and activity are important factors
 In making a god-honoring decision.

But the decision isn't merely shaped by what they encounter
 In their work.

After they share their own testimony,
 James the brother of Jesus and leader of the assembly
 Speaks not to share his experience
 But to illuminate their experience with God's word.

James tells those gathered,
 that the words of the prophets are in agreement
 with what has been happening.

James quotes from Amos
 Who described a time of renewal
 when all people would seek the Lord:
 Even the gentiles
 'who bear [God's] name.'

While our present-day experience of God is indeed important
 What the council illustrates for us
 Is that lived experience must be tested by God's word.

As Living Faith reminds us:
 "The Bible has been given to us
 by the inspiration of God
 to be the rule of faith and life.

It is the standard of all doctrine
 by which we must test any word that comes to us
 from church,
 world,
 or inner experience.

But more than just illuminating experience with Scripture,
 James is showing how seemingly contradictory passages of Scripture
 Should be handled.

While Luke doesn't share the arguments
 Made by the circumcision party,
 There are numerous verses in the Bible
 That they could point to...

What James helps us see is that
 Scripture is used to interpret scripture.

His ruling suggests that while the Jewish Christians
 May continue to follow covenant laws around circumcision,
 It is clear that the Gentiles do not need to become Jews
 To know God.

After clarifying the theological question,
 James makes a ruling that is more pragmatic in nature.

The Gentiles are asked to:

“abstain from food polluted by idols,
from sexual immorality,
from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”ⁱⁱⁱ

James makes a ruling that respects Jewish taboos
And allows the Jewish and Gentile Christians
to share a table with each other.

PAUSE

Those who know their Bible know that this decision
Wasn't always respected by either group.

But this Jerusalem council gives us a model
For making decisions on important matters.

What we observe is a respectful engagement of issues.
There is storytelling about how God appears to be at work
in the present,

As well as a testing of this activity
by what we believe God to have spoken in the past.

There is communal discernment
Not based solely on personal preferences
Or ideological aspirations,

But on what we know about God
And how we see God working among us.

May God teach us
To remember God in our decision-making.
And may we remain in the center of God's will. Amen.

ⁱ See Margaret Aymer “Council at Jerusalem” www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/council-at-jerusalem-2/commentary-on-acts-151-18-2

ⁱⁱ Acts 15:9 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 15:20 NIV