

Scripture - Acts 15:1-21, CEB

¹ 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 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.”¹

Sermon

It's mid-May in Kansas, and as we gather this morning, you may have one eye on the sky. The National Weather Service is warning of severe storms developing late this afternoon across our region, with the potential for large hail, damaging winds, and even tornadoes. Tomorrow brings another round of severe weather. These spring storms are as much a part of our Kansas rhythm as the graduation celebrations and gardens that are now filled with new growth after being dormant all winter.

These weather patterns remind us that we live in a world of transitions – sometimes beautiful, sometimes threatening, but always changing. Most of us know the tension between finding shelter in what's familiar and embracing new possibilities that come with change. Consider when you've been part of a group facing transition – perhaps your workplace implementing new procedures, your family navigating a significant change, or our congregation adapting to shifting community needs. How do we decide which traditions provide genuine shelter and which might actually create unnecessary barriers? When do comfortable practices provide stability, and when do they keep us from growing?

The early Christians faced this exact challenge as their movement grew beyond its Jewish roots. Their response reveals how resurrection people approach barriers – discerning which traditions build community and which get in the way of God's work.

Throughout our “Resurrection People” series, we're exploring how the early church navigated transitions with courage from the Holy Spirit. Last week, we saw Philip follow the Spirit's unexpected prompting to meet the Ethiopian eunuch on a desert road, leaving successful ministry in Samaria for a divine detour that demonstrated how God works through unplanned journeys.

Today, we witness perhaps the most significant crisis the early church faced—a key moment when they had to decide whether the resurrection of Jesus would truly break down barriers between people or simply create new walls with different labels. Their struggle reflects a pattern we've seen throughout human history: formal barriers fall, only to be replaced by more subtle divisions.

Consider what happened after the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965 here in the United States. While the law removed official barriers keeping Black Americans from voting, local officials in places like Selma, Alabama, quickly established new hurdles—complicated registration processes, limited office hours, frequently moved polling locations—all while technically following the letter of the law but violating its spirit. The old barriers disappeared, but new ones emerged to serve the same purpose.

¹ Acts 15:1-21, CEB.

This mirrors what the early church faced. Jewish believers didn't necessarily act spitefully when insisting that Gentile converts needed circumcision and to follow the law of Moses. These practices had defined their faith and identity for generations. Yet these requirements created unnecessary barriers to full inclusion, establishing a system where Gentiles could only belong by becoming culturally Jewish first.

In Selma, civil rights advocates distinguished between legitimate procedures and those designed to maintain exclusion. Local leaders built community organizing systems helping people navigate complicated processes while challenging unjust procedures through people power and persistent legal action.

This transformation required hard work from both the people directly affected and their supporters who knew that halfway inclusion wasn't good enough. Their efforts gradually changed voting from something only certain people could do into a right more people could actually use—creating ways to participate that earlier generations couldn't have imagined. But even today, we see new obstacles to voting popping up. Some places require specific types of ID that not everyone has, put fewer polling places in certain neighborhoods, cut back on early voting days, or make it harder to vote by mail.

Just like in the 1960s, making sure everyone can actually vote still requires people to pay attention and speak up—both those facing the barriers and others who understand that our democracy works best when all eligible citizens can easily cast their ballots. We're still figuring out which rules make sense for security and which ones just make it unnecessarily hard for some people to vote.

These struggles over who belongs and what barriers are legitimate echo an ancient pattern we see in the early church. Just as civil rights leaders had to determine which requirements served legitimate purposes and which merely preserved exclusion, the earliest Christians faced similar questions about inclusion and identity.

To understand Acts 15, it helps to understand the social context around the year 49. The Roman Empire maintained control through military might, while Jewish communities preserved their identity through religious practices. The emerging Christian movement existed as a vulnerable minority within Judaism, which was itself marginalized by Roman authorities.

The conflict centers on whether Gentile converts needed to adopt Jewish practices to be fully included. This wasn't merely theological debate but a fundamental question about power, identity, and belonging. Jewish believers held cultural power within the movement and could impose their practices on newcomers. Circumcision represented a significant barrier that would permanently mark Gentiles as "outsiders become insiders."

In verse 10, Peter asks,

"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?"²

² Acts 15:10, CEB.

He acknowledges the unequal impact of requiring full adherence to Jewish law for people from different cultural backgrounds. The decision to require only limited practices represents an attempt to balance respect for Jewish sensibilities with equitable access for Gentiles.

This passage connects to biblical themes of God's expansive justice—from Exodus liberation to Amos's critique of religious ritual divorced from justice, to Isaiah's vision of all nations streaming to God's mountain. The Jerusalem Council reveals God's character as one who consistently moves beyond human boundaries toward greater inclusion, prioritizing relationship with God through faith over religious conformity.

This passage also connects powerfully to our heritage as United Methodists. The Jerusalem Council's emphasis on removing unnecessary barriers to faith resonates with John Wesley's commitment to "catholic spirit" – his conviction that Christians need not "think alike to love alike."

Wesley emphasized God's "prevenient grace" working in all people's lives before they recognize it. Like Peter recognizing God's Spirit already active in Gentile believers, Wesley taught that God's grace operates beyond human boundaries. This shaped Methodist commitments to accessibility – from Wesley preaching in fields where ordinary people could hear him to creating simplified medical guides for those without healthcare access.

The council's balance between essential faith and practical accommodation mirrors Wesley's "conjunctive theology" – holding seeming opposites together rather than choosing between them. Instead of pitting tradition against innovation, Wesley sought faith's vital core while adapting methods to reach people effectively.

This Wesleyan approach of balancing essential principles with practical adaptation guides us as we confront similar challenges today. Consider our educational systems, where standardized requirements may create inadvertent barriers for diverse learners. Testing methods favor certain learning styles, and scheduling can assume traditional family structures, which can create obstacles to full participation for every student.

This mirrors the early church's dilemma: are we requiring unnecessary requirements in our institutions—practices that made sense in one context but now function as barriers? The Jerusalem Council provides a framework for evaluation: how might we preserve essential standards while adapting methods to ensure genuine inclusion?

We see similar patterns in our churches today. We develop worship styles and program schedules that feel welcoming to insiders but present invisible barriers to newcomers. The assumption that everyone can attend Sunday morning services overlooks those working weekend shifts. Our communication approaches might unintentionally exclude those who aren't digitally connected or who speak different languages.

In all of this, our personal responsibility begins with awareness. Each of us participates in systems where requirements that seem neutral to us might create barriers for others. Like Peter in Acts 15, we can listen carefully to different experiences, look for God's

work in people whose paths are different from our own. We can examine where our comfort might lead us to resist changes that would welcome others more fully.

This doesn't mean abandoning all standards or traditions. Like the Jerusalem Council, we're called to thoughtful discernment about which practices are essential and which might be adapted to create more inclusive communities. This examination isn't about assigning blame but about creating communities that better reflect God's welcome.

The good news is that God consistently works beyond human boundaries to create communities where everyone truly belongs. Acts 15 reveals a God who doesn't operate according to our categories of insider and outsider, but who pours out the Spirit on unexpected people in unexpected places.

In verse 8, Peter declares:

"⁸ God, who knows people's deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us."³

God's justice work often moves ahead of our understanding. God's welcome goes before and beyond our willingness to expand our circles. This means God is already at work in situations we consider most stuck or discouraging.

Christ's liberating work appears through freedom from unnecessary requirements. The early church recognized that salvation comes through grace for everyone, not through conformity to cultural patterns. This speaks directly to contemporary struggles with systems that impose burdens some cannot bear.

The Holy Spirit empowers this justice work by helping communities discern together. Their decision wasn't reached through majority vote but through listening to a variety of experiences, connecting them with scripture, and seeking consensus about God's direction. This pattern offers hope for the division we find in our world—the Spirit still guides communities willing to listen across differences.

This week, consider how you might participate in breaking barriers:

Learn from different perspectives by having coffee with someone whose life experience differs from yours. Ask what has helped them feel welcome or excluded in community settings, then listen without defensiveness.

Examine one setting where you have influence and identify a practice that might unintentionally create barriers. Consider how it might be adapted while holding on to what's essential.

Practice noticing who's missing from conversations and decisions. When planning an event or gathering, ask "Who might find this difficult to access, and how could we make it more inclusive?"

³ Galatians 15:8, CEB.

Pray daily for eyes to see as God sees, beyond external appearances to the heart.

The Jerusalem Council provided a pattern for approaching barriers with both theological conviction and practical wisdom. As resurrection people living in times of change, we're called to continue this work—examining our traditions through the lens of God's inclusive love, listening to voices from the margins, and aligning ourselves with the Spirit's barrier-breaking movement in the world.

In many ways, this work reflects the rhythm of seasons we experience in Kansas. Just as spring brings both gentle rains that nourish and occasional storms that reshape our landscape, God's Spirit brings both gentle guidance and sometimes dramatic transformation to our communities. The weather patterns remind us that change is inevitable—the question isn't whether change will come, but how we'll respond when it does.

When seasons shift, we adapt by necessity. We don't wear winter coats in summer heat or plant tomatoes in January snow. Yet in our communities and churches, we sometimes cling to practices long after they've stopped serving their purpose. Breaking barriers isn't about abandoning all structure or tradition—it's about thoughtful discernment regarding which boundaries protect and which simply exclude.

The early church discovered that breaking barriers didn't weaken their community—it strengthened it. By focusing on what was truly essential while adapting what was merely customary, they created pathways for new people to belong without losing their foundational identity. Their courage in breaking unnecessary barriers opened the way for the gospel to spread across cultures, languages, and continents.

Today, we're invited to continue this work of breaking barriers—in our church, our community, and our own hearts. Where might God be calling us to recognize a boundary that has become a barrier? What bridges might we build where walls once stood? As we move forward into this season of change, God will give you the wisdom to discern and the courage to act, becoming people who break barriers that divide and build communities where all can truly belong.

Will you pray with me?

God who tears down dividing walls, help us recognize barriers we've created or maintained. Give us wisdom to discern which traditions to preserve and which to reimagine. Fill us with courage to break barriers that separate us from one another and from you, transforming our communities through your inclusive love. Amen.⁴

⁴ In crafting today's sermon, I employed AI assistants like Claude and Apple Intelligence, yet the ultimate responsibility for its content rests with me. These tools offered valuable perspectives, but the most influential sermon preparation hinges on biblical study, theological insight, personal reflection, and divine guidance. I see AI as a supportive aid to enrich the sermon process while ensuring my own voice in proclaiming the Word of God.