

Embracing Difference within the Community¹

A Sermon for BMC on May 5th, 2024 [SLIDE 1]

“Difference is a place where God is found, in seeking peace we’re walking onto holy ground. God we surrender. Bring us together. Bring us together” – “Together,” by Nathan Grieser (VT 389)

Isn’t this an astounding line? I often get chills when I sing it. I think this line is so powerful because in it we hear and feel the Spirit’s wisdom and power teaching us about the reconciling power of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – the holy ground of Christian confession that speaks to how far God will go to bring us together in spite of all the many ways us humans will seek to divide. Ephesians 2:14 says of Jesus that “he is our peace; in his flesh he has made [us] one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

But as powerful as the line from this hymn and this verse from Ephesians may be, they also bring us face to face with an immense challenge. It is a challenge that has been faced by Christians throughout the ages and it is a challenge faced by us today in our own time and context. Here is the challenge: [SLIDE 2] **How is the reconciling power of Jesus to be embodied in our community in a tangible way so that the difference that divides can be embraced instead as the ground of holy togetherness?** In a world where headlines make it clear that wars both small and large are fueled by the fires of stereotype, racism, and demonizing rhetoric about the “other;” in a world where headlines show us protesters and counter-protestors and police clashing at social institutions that hold the promise of global cooperation and learning; and in a world where headlines mark Red Dress Day today on May 5th to honour and remember missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls while reconciling “Calls to Action” go

¹ Much of this sermon was inspired by Willie Jennings’ analysis of Acts 15 in his *Acts* commentary found in the series *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 140-151.

unheeded; in such a world, I ask again, **how is the reconciling power of Jesus to be embodied in our community in a tangible way so that the difference that divides can be embraced instead as the ground of holy togetherness?**

These headlines that I've just mentioned, all of which reveal deep divisions in our society, leave the church wondering how we might be a reconciling presence in the world when it comes to these *big* issues. But this morning I think our scripture reading suggests that we get at answers to these types of big questions by immersing ourselves in the nitty-gritty of life in our local contexts, in our local communities and the challenges we face here when we navigate differences. I am convinced that it is in the context of the local, the local community we live and work in and the local church, that we learn how God's Spirit is teaching us that difference is a place not to run away from or seek to cover over or destroy, but a place where God is found – a place where we discover we are on holy ground together. *That*, I want to suggest, is what the passage from Acts 15, our passage for today, can help us see. [SLIDE 3]

At first blush, and having seen this story acted out this morning, this might seem to be a strange claim to make about Acts 15. But stick with me, because once we get past being distracted by the strangeness of the difference and rivalry that is causing such a stir there, we might just begin to see the strangeness of our own divisions and rivalries, and we might just begin to discern the together-making power of the Spirit in our time, just as the Apostles did so long ago. Above I said that talking about differences and rivalries must begin with the local, and in our passage from Acts 15 we see just such a beginning point. [SLIDE 4] In this case, of course, the “local” involved the community of Jesus' Jewish disciples in and around 1st century Jerusalem and their long-distance relationship with a no-so-local community of new believers up to the north in the Roman city of Antioch. While we might find it difficult to imagine, one of *the*

key points of difference and even rivalry in the early Jesus movement was over a question of how the inclusion of Gentiles in the covenant would take place. [SLIDE 5] Would that inclusion and acceptance happen through overcoming the difference between Jew and Gentile or would it be achieved by a way of living together amidst that difference?

Gentiles were non-Jews, and as non-Jews, they typically lived, held to ethical norms, and participated in religious institutions that were different from Jews. While there was no doubt many avenues for social cooperation between Jews and Gentiles in the ancient world, nonetheless there were also many examples of rivalry and derogatory rhetoric traded back and forth between Jews and Gentiles. But, already in Jesus' ministry, it was evident that, although he had his own criticisms of the lifestyles and religious patterns of the Gentiles (cf. Matthew 6:7, Mark 10:42 for two examples) the Kingdom of God that he announced and inaugurated through his life was a kingdom of welcome for Gentiles too.² So, as we read Acts 15, we need to keep in mind a primary difference and rivalry at play between these two groups.

Now, it is natural reading about this difference while standing here today, to place ourselves in the shoes of one of these two groups (Jewish followers of Jesus or Gentile followers of Jesus). Historically those of us in the church have tended to read ourselves as being in the position of Jesus' earliest disciples and so have read ourselves as being in the place of his Jewish followers. Historically speaking, though, where we stand in this story is in the place of the Gentiles or non-Jews. Our faith-heritage, you might say, began as outsiders that had to be brought in – as strangers who had to become family – as people considered 'different,' even 'rivals,' yet somehow invited in. We do well always to remember this as we navigate our own

² Even one of the harsher interactions recorded between Jesus and a Gentile, the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, ends with Jesus affirming her great faith (Matt. 15:28).

debates with those inside and outside the church that we call ‘different’ or ‘rivals.’ We once were far off and were brought near.

In the early church, however, there were also followers of Jesus who began to straddle the line between the two groups. The Apostle Paul looms large here. [SLIDE 6] He would become a central bridge-building figure in the debate over how Gentiles could be included in the covenant, how they would become part of the family. Paul’s experience of Jesus on the Damascus Road had led him to be a messenger of Good News to the Gentiles. But, as a Jew himself, Paul struggled mightily throughout his entire ministry with articulating just how Gentile believers in Jesus were to be made a part of a covenant with God. Today we take for granted that others can become part of the family of God through faith in Jesus and through commitment to following him. But, for Paul, what we take for granted was not so self-evident. Why? Because throughout history, inclusion in the covenant – inclusion in the family of God, had been established through a foundational ritual that involved a physical transformation of the bodies of all Jewish newborn males, namely circumcision. This ritual was firmly rooted in Jewish identity, having been established already with Abraham in the book of Genesis. And this ritual was carried forward throughout history as it now continues in Jewish communities to this day.³

Covenantal inclusion – being considered part of God’s people – was primarily achieved through this Patriarchal custom of circumcision – and I note here that it was a *patriarchal* custom because at the time there was no parallel mechanism or ritual marking female inclusion in the covenant. Rather, female inclusion was established by virtue of social and family ties to the

³ It is also notable to mention here that Jewish communities have developed rituals of covenantal inclusion for girls and women as well. See this article regarding the modern-day development of the *brit bat*, the Jewish ceremony of celebration at the birth of a girl: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/development-of-brit-bat/>

circumcised patriarch of the family.⁴ In Paul's day, as before, the law was that every Jewish boy was to be circumcised on the 8th day of life – and indeed as law-abiding Jews, Jesus' parents followed this law with respect to him too. So, as strange as it might sound, when the Jesus movement began to spread widely beyond the confines of its local Jewish beginnings and began to dramatically grow among the nations, a problem arose and that was, “how can we bring Gentiles into the covenant – how can we overcome our difference and rivalry - when they don't follow the law of Moses,” especially with respect to this very significant religious rite, circumcision.⁵

Well, one solution was forged early on and that was the practice of Gentile circumcision as an element of conversion [SLIDE 7]. While Gentile converts couldn't be *strictly* law-abiding in the sense of having circumcision performed on the 8th day after birth, at least they could do it *now*. After all, even Abraham was circumcised as an adult.⁶ Thus the argument went and so, as we saw in our readers theatre, some individuals from Judea taught the fledgling Gentile Jesus followers in Antioch that this was the way in. You want to be included, you've got to conform to our pattern of life and have the surgery. I'm guessing that for many of us, this sounds like a

⁴ That the covenant was established through the system of Patriarchy meant that women did not have to be circumcised to be in the covenant. The inclusion of women in the covenant came through the social ties to their men, as well as through their child-bearing function as mothers. There are a couple of sources that discuss this. See, for example, <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/making-covenant-men-and-women>. For a scholarly and comprehensive discussion that also examines the tensions this question has raised through history, see: Shaye J. D. Cohen's *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (University of California Press, 2005).

⁵ While circumcision was sometimes practiced by Gentiles and surrounding nations, when it was, it was done for a variety of reasons unrelated to Jewish law, and so was not practiced in a way that would have counted as according to the law of Moses. Matthew Thiessen, in his book *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity*, talks about the knowledge of circumcised Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible. Cf. “Uncircumcised and Circumcised Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible,” (pp. 43-64).

⁶ Some scholars believe that some of Paul's “opponents” used Abraham as an example of why they should get circumcised as adults. Paul used Abraham's example to make the opposite argument in Romans 4.

totally bizarre idea and one that is so foreign to us and yet it was a perfectly normal question to have to ask in the context of the first century church.

As the story goes in Acts (cf. 15:10), this first solution—requiring circumcision—was eventually not taken by the early church as it was seen as asking of the Gentile converts to take on an unnecessary burden. After all, as Paul and Barnabas’ testimony had made clear, they had witnessed how God’s Spirit had already been poured out on the Gentiles – they had already been brought together into the covenantal fold without circumcision.⁷ [SLIDE 8] In that famous council, the reconciling power of Jesus became tangible and embodied as Peter and then Paul and Barnabas all responded to the nudging of the Spirit and testified to the holy togetherness that God was establishing amidst the difference between Jew and Gentile. Once they did this, however, one of the key questions remaining was, “as new members of the covenant, what ethical admonition are they to be given as they seek to be faithful?” In other words, what does have to change with the Gentiles as they come in? James, an Elder of the church, had an inspired answer, and that was that they abstain from four forms of activity that were typically associated with pagan worship at the time.⁸ “If Gentiles are to be members of the covenant,” says James, “at the very least they need to let go of some of the religious practices that involved them in the worship of other gods.⁹ That’s it. “If they seek to follow Jesus while taking care to avoid those things,” says James, then “they will do well” (Acts 15:20-29).

⁷ Again, Paul appeals to Abraham’s faith to say he was made part of God’s people *prior* to circumcision and that this was a model for how the Gentiles similarly come into the covenant. This is the opposite argument to what others taught, namely, that Abraham was a Gentile who was circumcised as an adult convert.

⁸ The list appears in Acts 15: 19-20.

⁹ While the church in Antioch seems to welcome this suggestion, we don’t know to what extent this request was possibly also received as in its own way burdensome. The church today is continually struggling with the legacy of colonialism and how it has historically named most practices related to Indigenous identity as “pagan” and therefore necessary to let go of. The irony here, however, is that the history of Christian faith, identity, and practice has been much more fluid and changing, involving a lot of syncretistic developments. There is no “pure” Christianity.

When the members of the church in Anitoch read the letter delivered by Judas and Silas, they rejoiced at the exhortation that they had received from the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem. *They rejoiced!* They rejoiced because the Spirit had already been at work in their community, drawing them deeper and deeper into the story of Jesus, and now the community of disciples working and worshipping in the mother church of their movement, had welcomed and embraced them, and so they rejoiced together with the bridge building Paul and Barnabas.

The rejoicing of the church in Antioch was not a given. Things could have gone differently. In fact, much like we imagined an alternative ending to the Ananias and Sapphria story last week that ended on a more positive note, we might perform a similar exercise with Acts 15 but imagine an alternative ending where the letter sent to the church in Antioch produced a different response. Could you imagine if the passage had ended: “When its members read it, they were *incensed* at the exhortation,” or “When the members read it, they *wept* at the exhortation.” What if Peter and Paul and Barnabas and James had resisted the nudge of the Holy Spirit and not stood up at council to affirm the movement of God’s Spirit upon the Gentiles in Antioch? What if debate in Jerusalem had reached a fever pitch and names had been called and people had stormed out and finally the council had decided, the Gentile church in Antioch must come into full “alignment” with the law of Moses. What if they decided that each male would have to have the normative body of a law-abiding covenant member?¹⁰ What might have been the outcome then?

For me, one of the most significant moments in this passage comes when Peter, and then Paul and Barnabas and then finally James, stands up and acknowledges the presence of God’s Spirit at work among the Gentiles. I just simply think this moment illustrates for us our calling

¹⁰ Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, 140.

when it comes to embracing difference within community. For all of these men, Elders, Apostles, and bridge builders, show us what it means to embody the reconciling power of Jesus in our community in a tangible way so that difference can be embraced as the ground of holy togetherness. All of these leaders had to have been attentive to the Spirit of God at work expanding the community of God beyond the boundaries previously established through history. All of these leaders would have had to have been captured by the reconciling, bridge-building, weaving-together action of the Spirit of God amidst the difference that threatened, in this case, to divide.¹¹ I began this sermon with a question: [SLIDE 9] **How is the reconciling power of Jesus to be embodied in our community in a tangible way so that the difference that divides can be embraced instead as the ground of holy togetherness?** I want to suggest that some of the key actors in Acts 15 have given us at least two embodied, tangible ways to embody the reconciling power of Jesus amidst our differences and they are as follows (maybe you can add more during WR time): [SLIDE 10]

1. The embodied work of attention – to where the Spirit of God is already at work expanding the community of God.

Where, here at BMC, or in the broader MCEC community, is the Spirit of God at work expanding the community of faith? Are we ready to look in places where we might not expect the Spirit at work? Are we ready to be bridge-builders, straddling the line between those considered “outside” and those considered “inside” the fold? May we be ready to spot the Spirit at work, expanding the circle of God’s family ever wider.

2. [SLIDE 11] The embodied work of standing up – to embrace and celebrate the presence of God’s Spirit at work amidst our differences.

¹¹ The verbs and adverbs in this sentence are inspired by Willie Jennings analysis of this passage in his *Acts* commentary (cf. pp.140-151).

This last tangible action can be hard, especially when fear governs our actions. After all, standing up and speaking from our heart makes us vulnerable. Like Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James, there is the chance that our words will not be received well – this is always the risk of standing up. But throughout the scriptural story God’s people continually find themselves called to stand up – to take the risk of proclaiming God’s Holy new work. May we be bold enough to take that risk too in our time. For wouldn’t it be wonderful, if when the history of the next two hundred years of Bloomingdale Mennonite Church is written, that it would say of us: [SLIDE 12] They paid attention to the Spirit of God, they stood up to embrace and celebrate God’s Spirit at work in the deepest divisions and differences of their day, and everyone who interacted with their congregation rejoiced at the exhortations they gave. May it be so. AMEN.