

3rd Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Acts 15:1-21

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

*"After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago."*

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'

Arguments are seldom fun. Couples argue. Siblings argue. Friends argue. Politicians argue. My dog and my cat argue. Conflict is a part of every relationship. And as much as we would like to believe otherwise, the Church is no exception. In fact, when some of my seminary friends ask me for advice for

how to interview with churches that are considering calling them as their pastor, I recommend to them that they ask each church's pastor nominating committee the following question: "what do y'all argue about?" And I tell them that if the response is "we don't argue about anything" then a) they are lying or b) if they are telling the truth, then they are not hanging out with each other enough.

The basic fact is that conflict is part of the territory whenever we are in community with one another. Such can certainly be a very frustrating reality of being in a Christian community. In fact, many people, especially those in my generation in their 20's and 30's, have become very disillusioned with the church. They complain that the church "does nothing but argue." And, more often than not, this sentiment is expressed as if this is a recent development, something that popped up in the late 20th and early 21st century.

Today's passage reminds us that the notion that conflict is a recent development in the history of Christianity could not be further from the truth. In fact, we have already observed conflict last week, although we touched on it very briefly. Last week, we recalled how the widows were not receiving equal portions of financial aid and food from the church's coffers. Stephen was called to lead a group of seven deacons to help distribute the aid more justly. That was conflict on a local level. However, today we see conflict on a larger scale because Christianity is growing along with the inevitability of communal conflict.

The conflict in today's passage is about circumcision or, more precisely, whether or not to require adult Gentile converts to be circumcised to join the followers of the Way. We are told that a group of believers come down from Judea and are concerned because they believe that Gentile converts (A.K.A. non-Jewish people) needed to be circumcised to be included in the Christian movement. Another group of leaders including Paul, Barnabas, and Peter, disagree and say that circumcision should not be required.

Now, to more fully understand this conflict, we must recognize that there was both a practical and a theological aspect to the argument.

To explain the more pragmatic side to this argument, let us for a moment pretend that I am a Christian leader in the first century A.D. who is trying to convert you all - a group of male Gentiles - to Christianity. The conversation might go something like this:

"Hey y'all! The Lord be with you! (*And also with you*). There's this great new religious movement that we would like y'all to join. Our leader, our king, our savior, is a man who is the son of God. His name is Jesus and he walked this earth and preached the gospel of grace and healed people. He hung out with the outcasts, and the sinners, and the tax collectors, and the prostitutes, and tells us that no sin can keep us from the love of God. And then he was crucified and died and was buried. But then he rose from the grave! He defeated death! There is now NOTHING that can separate us from the love of God and we would love y'all to help us spread this good news!

"But there's this one little detail we should probably mention....if you want to join us you have to cut off the tip of your penis."

Friends, I'm not expert in advertising, but that's not a great marketing strategy. There are probably few ways to more quickly drain the enthusiasm from a crowd of men as telling them that they have to get circumcised.

So, that's the practical aspect of this argument. However, there was an equally important theological aspect to this conflict. The people who were in favor of requiring circumcision were not doing so because they were fundamentalist, racist bigots. For these men and women, they struggled with this

issue because they were raised as good Jews who understood circumcision to be the “marker” which set aside God’s people as God’s people. Their argument came from an understanding that as long as God has been in relationship with us, circumcision has been an important part of our identity as those who belong to God and we shouldn’t be so quick to toss that part of our identity to the side in the efforts of radical inclusion.

Now, on the other hand, Peter, Barnabas, and Paul say that “we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” whether or not we’re circumcised.

And, so they were at an impasse. Some people wanted circumcision to be required and other didn’t. They were at a standstill - perhaps not so different than Shelter Islanders who do not want a substation and the people of Greenport who don’t want another attempt at an underwater power cable.

So, they meet at what we now refer to as the Jerusalem Council. People from both sides send delegates and they hash it out. Both sides speak and make compelling cases. And, to make a long story short, a compromise is reached. Another leader named James, gets up and proposes that the two sides meet in the middle. Circumcision will *not* be required of adult male gentile converts. *But* all male gentile converts will be required to follow a couple other regulations that don’t involve their reproductive organ and a knife. And, according to the text, everyone is happy and the matter seems settled. However, because of a letter called Galatians that is written by Paul several years later that speaks of the same conflict, we know that the matter was not completely settled. The conversation continued.

Friends, arguments have *always* been an aspect of Christian communities. And, until Jesus comes back, they will remain a part of living in community with one another. However, after journeying through the conflict in today’s passage, I feel compelled to revise a previous statement that I made earlier in this sermon. At the beginning of today’s sermon, I posited that many people in their 20s and 30s (and likely many others of *any* age!) are frustrated with the amount of arguing that happens in churches nowadays. I now take back that statement and propose it again with the following revision: I believe that people are frustrated with the Church not so much because we argue but rather because *of what it is that we argue about!*

In today’s passage, we are told that the early Church was arguing about how best to spread the Gospel. But what they *weren’t* arguing about can be equally insightful. They weren’t arguing about the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, or whether or not to get a new hymnal, or the decorations in the fellowship hall, or whether to have worship at 9:00 or 10:30. They were arguing about something that actually forced them to articulate who they were and what they believed and where the Holy Spirit was calling them to be.

Now friends, I’m about to do something that can be very frustrating to do during a sermon but it is often very necessary: I’m going to place before us a series of questions and then I’m not going to answer them!

- First of all, are we scared of conflict? Most mainline denominations are shrinking in size; Presbyterians are no exception. An unfortunate byproduct of smaller congregations is that many congregations are so scared of conflict, so scared of upsetting *anybody* lest they lose another member, that they really become stagnant and just try to please everybody. It takes courage to engage conflict and it takes trust that the Holy Spirit will provide the wisdom for us to grow within conflict rather than to be destroyed by it.

- Secondly, during conflict, are we willing to express personal experience instead of personal preference? When Peter was trying to convince the council that circumcision shouldn’t be required of gentile

converts, he didn't do so by saying "y'all are a bunch of racist bigots who are fundamentalist jerks who don't want the Gospel to be spread!" Peter convinced the council by giving personal testimony. He shared with them the stories of welcoming Gentile converts into the Way. Peter was able to speak about the situation personally without making it "about him."

•Thirdly, what *do* we argue about? Sit down, make a list. This exercise works not only with churches but also with best friends, spouses, siblings, and the like. Is what we argue about really that important? Are we growing because of these arguments? Shelter Island Presbyterian Church has been around since 1743. I promise you there have been *thousands* of arguments that have happened since then. How many of those arguments, looking back perhaps 20 years later, proved to be truly superficial? How many of those arguments truly shaped the future of this church and the way(s) in which the Gospel has been shared?

Arguments are seldom fun but, if done right, they can be tremendously productive opportunities of grace and growth. Tricia and I haven't even been married a year and we've already learned this lesson and it is this: if we were to look back on the moments when we have grown the most as a couple, those moments were not the pleasant, Hallmark, lovey-dovey moments. The times that we have grown the most as a couple have been the tough times when we haven't seen eye to eye. Those moments of conflict, *those* are the moments that we learned more about each other and who God is calling us to be together.

In a way, being the Church is no different. Yeah we argue. Yeah, we bicker and we banter and we complain and we debate. But, if we fight the "good fight," if we argue the "good argument" and truly listen to each other and keep focused on the larger calling of Holy Spirit, then we will grow in ways that would surprise even the most cynical among us!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.