April 23, 2017
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Acts “Saved by Grace”
Acts 15:1-12a

This morning we will return to our journey though the book of Acts. Let me first remind you of where we are. We have been in Acts 14, learning about Paul’s first missionary journey with his friend Barnabas. If you recall, Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel and made disciples in several cities in Asia Minor, and at the end of chapter 14 we learn that they retrace their steps on their way home, encouraging the believers and appointing elders to oversee the new church plants. They travel back to Antioch in Syria to reunite with their sending church, where they give a glowing report of all that God accomplished in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles…the non-Jews who they ministered to on their trip.

This morning we’ll pick up the story there in Acts 15:1-12a. Please read.

When we read a story like this one here in Acts 15, we discover once again why the New Testament does not fit the genre of myth or legend. If you are writing a myth or legend, you simply do not include disillusioning, painful, divisive arguments like the one we just read about. This awkward but important dispute is included in the book of Acts because it happened, and because such disputes helped refine and clarify Christian theology from the very beginning of church history. Unfortunately, those of us who have served in church leadership can relate all too well with theological and doctrinal arguments that can and often do create tremendous conflict within the church. I wish I could say those days are over, but clearly we have our own history of wrangling with our former denomination over issues that finally became a deal breaker for us.

Nobody enjoys theological disputes and debates, but based upon what we read here in Acts 15 and what we can observe throughout church history, not only are such disputes inevitable, they are also necessary to keep the Gospel of Jesus Christ from being hijacked by well-intentioned people who would attach all kinds of conditions to our hope of salvation. Many of us are conflict avoidant by nature, so stories like this are uncomfortable and even disillusioning to some degree. But listen: there are some things worth fighting for, and salvation by grace alone through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross is definitely worth fighting for. So let’s look to the text and see what we can learn.

As we zoom back into the church in Antioch, we must imagine the joy of the congregation as Paul and Barnabas return from their long missionary journey. Remember, there was no mail service, no phones or internet connections, so the church in Antioch has awaited anxiously for the return of their spiritual fathers with no guarantee that they have even survived the perilous journey by sea and dangerous roads. They have prayed every day for Paul and Barnabas, and
now after several months, their beloved pastors have returned. I imagine for several weeks the church gathered to hear Paul and Barnabas tell story after story of God’s powerful movement among the Gentiles, even as they suffered persecution and violence as a result. No doubt the believers were moved to worship with thanksgiving and joy as they heard all that God had accomplished. However, we learn in Acts 15:1 that some who were present during the mission trip report have some concerns about the Gentile converts.

In vs. 1 we read, “But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

Now, before you form a nasty picture of these “men from Judea” in your minds, keep in mind that the church is very young, and there is no Ephesians 2 even written yet that so clearly articulates, “We have been saved by grace through faith…” These men who come from Judea are believers in Jesus, but they are Jewish believers who quite naturally interpret Christianity to be a Jewish reality, since Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Their intentions are not evil, nor are they trying to “control” or “manipulate” the believers in Antioch. They are simply teaching what must have seemed obvious to them: one must first become a Jew to be saved by the Jewish Messiah, and the sign of the covenant for Jewish men was to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses.

Now both Paul and Barnabas are also Jewish converts, but they just returned from witnessing first-hand how the Holy Spirit moved among the Gentiles in Asia Minor, so they immediately engage in a long debate with these men from Judea. Luke reports in vs. 2 that it got pretty nasty, “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 the apostles and the elders about this question.”

Here we see the beginning of a practice that still continues to this day in the Christian church. When there is a theological dispute, there are two authorities that are consulted: the apostles and the elders. The apostles were those whom Jesus chose to carry and communicate the Gospel after His ascension. In most cases, the apostles had walked with Jesus and directly received His teachings. They personally witnessed His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and they were those who had received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Thus the apostles served as the authority for the early church, and even to this day we look to the teachings of the apostles found in the New Testament as the primary source for our theology and faith.

The other authority that we look to when a theological dispute arises are those who have been called to serve as elders. Elders within the Christian tradition are those who play the role of overseers for a local congregation. They are people who demonstrate a level of maturity, wisdom, discernment, and faithfulness in their walk with Christ. They are people of prayer, but
they are also those who are recognized as leaders. The Greek word used here for “elders” is *presbyteros*, which is where we get the term “Presbyterians.” As we saw in the end of Acts 14 and now here in Acts 15, elders (presbyters) were set in place to provide oversight, to help settle disputes, and to give leadership to the ancient church, which is why we continue that practice here at Colonial. We have 20 elders who are all elected by the congregation to serve as overseers, and should a theological dispute arise in our church…and they do from time to time…the first authority is the apostolic teaching found in the New Testament, and the second authority in our church is the Session…the elders.

Now, there are times when such disputes must be considered by more than just the elders at a local church, so as we see here in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas and some other leaders from the church in Antioch seek to call a council in which the subject can be vetted and discussed among a larger group of elders and under the authority of the apostles. Again, there are some disputes here at Colonial that can be settled by the discernment of our local Elders as they interpret the teachings of the apostles in prayer; but we also have the ability to appeal to our Presbytery and our General Assembly should the dispute require greater consideration by a wider representation of elders from churches throughout the country and even the world.

I say all of this so that you can connect the dots between the New Testament and the way our church handles conflict and theological disputes here at Colonial. You may think that’s a needless formality, but it’s not. Heresy in the church can do incredible damage to the souls of men and women and the cause of Christ, so every expression of the local church needs to have a way to settle disputes and preserve the Gospel of Jesus Christ from corruption by those who would alter it for any number of well-intentioned reasons.

Let’s return to our story beginning with vs. 3, “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.”

Paul and Barnabas are on fire following their experiences on the mission field, and even though a theological controversy is causing them to make a trip to Jerusalem, they will not miss the opportunity to share what has been accomplished through Christ to all the believers along the way. By the time Paul and Barnabas reach Jerusalem, a Holy Spirit fire is spreading all over the region regarding the conversion of the Gentiles. We are certainly left with the impression that MOST of the believers in the ancient world were thrilled to learn about the Gentiles placing their faith in Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit! And even as Paul and Barnabas share their faith in the VERY Jewish setting of the Jerusalem church, we should assume that MOST of the believers are giving praise to God with joy and thanksgiving that the Gospel is spreading throughout the world with such power. However, predictably, there are those who have some concerns. In vs. 5
we read, “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses.’”

Now I know we are all preconditioned to hate the Pharisees; but again, please resist that tendency. These are fellow believers…they are those who love Jesus; and they are those who have likely been cut off from their families; they lost their jobs; and they have lost all respect in the community in which they were raised. The Pharisee converts have come to Christ at a far greater cost than most of us, so let us honor their faith, their suffering, as well as the rigorous training they endured to become devout Pharisees. And let’s be realistic here about our expectations: we cannot expect those who were raised and indoctrinated into rigorous belief systems to easily walk away from all they were taught, particularly when many of those practices brought value, meaning, and structure to their lives. Whether we’re dealing with Hindus, Muslims, or people from various denominations within Christianity, everyone comes to the faith with some baggage attached that they would like to keep with them. The Christian Pharisees create tension here with their particular understanding of Christianity, but I suspect their intent is noble, and for them, it’s logical. Nevertheless, that doesn’t make it right…what the Pharisee converts are asking for has great implications, and clearly their insistence upon the Gentiles going through Jewish circumcision is an issue that creates considerable debate among the elders and the apostles in the Jerusalem church.

Finally, Peter…likely the apostle of greatest honor in the room…speaks his heart regarding the dispute. Beginning in vs. 6 we read, “The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to each of them, ‘Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.”

Let’s stop there for just a moment. Notice that Peter appeals to what he has witnessed firsthand when God called him to bring the gospel to the Roman centurion named Cornelius, as we read about in Acts 10. Peter reminds them that God initiated every part of that experience. God came to Peter in a vision; God came to Cornelius in a vision; God spoke through Peter as he presented the gospel to Cornelius; and God sent His Holy Spirit upon that entire household who were tenderhearted, repentant and believing on the name of Jesus Christ. God made no distinction. He cleansed the hearts of those in the home of Cornelius because of their faith in Jesus; irrespective of whether they were Jews or Gentiles.

He goes on in vs. 10, “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” Peter’s question is very direct here: those who wish make Jewish circumcision a prerequisite to salvation are
putting GOD to the test! Why is that? Because clearly God has already demonstrated a willingness to send His Holy Spirit upon those who have not been circumcised...so how can the Pharisee party insist that God will withhold salvation from the Gentile believers who remain uncircumcised? What’s more, Peter acknowledges that the weight of the Jewish law and customs did not lead to salvation or make salvation any easier for their Jewish fathers or even those gathered in the assembly who had committed themselves to faithfully observe the Jewish law and customs.

Peter then fires the canon that will forever shape the way we think about salvation in the church. Look at vs. 11, “But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Peter cuts to the heart of the issue here in vs. 11. Those believers who were raised as Jews...which is pretty much everyone in the room at this point...would all have to admit that their salvation will be based upon the grace of Jesus, not their circumcision or their adherence to the law. That path has been tried, and they all know that they were anything but saved until Jesus died and rose again. They understand that it was at that moment when they repented and called upon the name of Jesus that they were forgiven and received the Holy Spirit—their salvation was a gift from the only One who died for them. Peter reminds them that Jesus on the cross and Jesus raised from the dead is the only hope of salvation for all the elders and all the apostles who make up this council. “So,” says Peter, “what is true for all of us, is also true for the Gentiles.”

Luke writes in vs. 12, “And all the assembly fell silent...” I imagine it did. Salvation by grace alone is astonishing, mind-boggling, earth-shaking, and altogether exclusive to the claims of Christianity. Every other religion in the world ultimately boils down to good people must do good things to be with a good god, or else. But here in Acts 15, Peter states what will become the most scandalous, most hope-filled, most central doctrine in all of the Christian faith: we are saved by grace alone. Our salvation hinges on what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and there are no additional qualifiers regarding our heritage, our morality, or our accomplishments that determine our salvation.

Friends, I know so many of you have heard of this doctrine a million times. You think you get “salvation by grace alone” right? But listen: if you think for even a minute that you have mastered that doctrine without attaching some little piece of law to it, I suspect you might be surprised to discover that almost all of us do exactly that, no matter how hard we try to resist it.

I was raised as a Southern Baptist, and here’s what I was taught: “We’re saved by grace through faith, but we still need to try as hard as we can to follow God’s law. We won’t be able to do it, but we need to demonstrate that we are trying to the best of our ability.” That’s called semi-Pelagianism, and it’s contrary to the gospel of grace.
Many who have been raised in various traditions will claim “salvation by grace” but then they will add: you must be baptized to be saved…you must be Catholic to be saved…you must be baptized in the Church of Christ to be saved…you must join the church to be saved…you must abstain from this sin or that sin to be saved…you must renounce this group or that group to be saved…you must separate yourself from this person or that influence to be saved…you must ascribe to this doctrine or that doctrine to be saved.

All of us, if given the opportunity, will attach a little law to the doctrine of grace…we just will. We need that bit of law to feel like we’ve done something to merit and to prove that we are the true believers, as opposed to “those people” who are not.

Listen church: our only hope is in the grace of Jesus Christ who suffered the cross to pay our debt that we could never repay. We are saved by grace alone. Our lives come under the grace of Jesus when we place our faith in Him as our Hope, our Savior, and our Lord. As Paul will write so eloquently in Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

Now let me be perfectly blunt, even at the risk of offending you: It is categorically wrong for us to claim and assume God’s unwarranted, unmerited grace for our own salvation and then turn around and attach law to that doctrine of grace as it applies to people from other countries, traditions, cultures, or backgrounds. That’s what Peter just said, and it’s incredibly important that we hear him again.

The church historically shoots itself in the foot by allowing the doctrine of salvation by grace alone to be hitched to some subtle version of the law, no matter how noble the intentions. I have fallen into that trap on more than one occasion in my life, and I suspect many of you have as well.

It’s one of the reasons I refer to my travels around the world so often in my sermons. As you travel and see Christ at work in different people groups in various cultures throughout the world, you realize that whatever we hold to be true about Christianity must apply to all of them…every man, woman, and child in every corner of the globe, irrespective of education, culture, race, gender, socio-economic status, political party, etc. If you attach a condition, like “you must believe the Bible is true” to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, you will put God to the test when you see the Holy Spirit working among illiterate villagers in rural India who have never read the Bible and yet they have believed the proclamation of the Gospel and they are being saved with powerful signs and wonders. If you attach “do your best to follow the law” to the doctrine of salvation by grace, you will put God to the test as He pours out His Spirit upon
hardened criminals in hundreds of prisons throughout the world. If you attach sexual purity to the doctrine of salvation by grace, you damn us all!

Church—don’t attach one little bit of law to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone! Let us keep our sticky fingers off that precious gift made possible through the blood of the Lamb! And let us be thankful that the One who died for our sins is the same One who empowers us to proclaim the free gift of God’s grace to a burdened and discouraged world. He is the One who tasted death for everyone. He is our only Hope, He is their only Hope, and His is the only name given to us under heaven by which we must be saved. Let us conclude by agreeing with the Apostle Peter as we confess together: “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Let’s pray.