This morning we will resume our journey through the book of Acts. It’s been a while, so let me remind you of where we are and what has recently taken place in this great history of the early church. If you recall, toward the end of Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas return to their church in Antioch in Syria following a year or more of being on the mission field. Soon after they arrive home, they discover that there is a big theological controversy brewing in the church regarding the conditions necessary for the Gentiles (the non-Jews) to be saved. Some Jewish-Christians have recently come down from the mother church in Jerusalem saying that non-Jews must first submit to Jewish circumcision before they can be saved through faith in Jesus. This debate leads to the Jerusalem Council, consisting of Paul and Barnabas, the apostles, and other elders, agree that the Gentiles do NOT have to undergo circumcision to be saved, because all people are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ...Jews and Gentiles alike. After this controversy is resolved, Paul and Barnabas return to pastor their church in Antioch, but after some time, Paul suggests that they return to visit the churches they had helped establish in Asia Minor. Barnabas agrees to the idea, but he wants to take his cousin John-Mark. Paul refuses to take John-Mark because the young man had abandoned the team on their first missionary journey, and thus there arises a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, such that they decide to go their separate ways. So that’s where we’re at…and we’ll pick up the story there in Acts 15:39-16:5. Please stand and let’s read the Word of God together.

And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

As always, my message this morning is comprised of some teaching and some preaching. I will begin by unpacking the text with you to see what we can learn and observe, and then I will conclude with how this passage speaks to our lives, our culture, and our church here at Colonial.

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So, please open your Bible or your Bible app to Acts 15, and let’s get started. The first thing we need to learn more about is Paul’s new travelling companion, Silas. What we know of Silas is that he has been a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:27), and he was specifically chosen by the church in Jerusalem to help communicate the decision of the Jerusalem Council with the church in Antioch. Again, if this is all a bit confusing, open up your Bibles or your Bible App and skim through Acts 15 while I cover this ground so you can see what we’re referring to. We also know that Silas is referred to as a prophet in Acts 15:32, and that his ministry brought strength and encouragement to the church in Antioch. It also seems likely that Silas was a Roman citizen as we’ll read about in a few weeks in Acts 16:37.

Luke writes in the end of Acts 15 that Paul and Silas have been commended by the church in Antioch, and they depart on their missionary journey. However, instead of crossing the Mediterranean Sea as Paul did on the first missionary journey, they head north by foot, making their way through the regions of Syria and Cilicia. As you can see from the map, Syria is the region directly north of Israel, and Cilicia is the region immediately to the west once you make it around the northeast shore of the Mediterranean. Luke writes that Paul and Silas strengthened the churches in these regions…they didn’t plant churches there, which means there were already significant gatherings of Jesus-followers in these regions by the early 50’s.

In 16:1, Luke writes that Paul and Silas make it to Derbe and then to the city of Lystra. If you recall, Paul’s last journey to Lystra was a painful one. Remember that in Acts 14 Paul was stoned and left for dead in Lystra at the hands of angry Jewish men who had tracked him down from Antioch and Iconium. However, Paul did not die. God spares Paul’s life, and Paul actually goes back into Lystra and “strengthens the souls of the disciples” in that city. We must imagine now that Paul’s return to Lystra on this second journey leads to a mixed bag of emotions. Here is where he suffered immensely for the Gospel; and yet here is where God miraculously restored his life and many came to the faith. Paul will soon learn something else that God accomplished through his suffering.

Look at vs. 1-3, “Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him…”

As it turns out, Paul’s suffering and near-martyrdom greatly influenced the life of a young man who was raised in Lystra…a young man named Timothy. Timothy will become a blessing like no other in Paul’s life…Paul’s relationship with Timothy will become one of the most cherished within the New Testament; so much that Paul will eventually refer to Timothy as his son. That relationship is likely the product of Paul’s willingness to suffer for the gospel, which so
influenced young Timothy that it led him to become a Jesus follower and an apprentice of Paul’s. Isn’t that how God works? Our pain and apparent failure often serves as the fertile ground where God does His best work. We’ll speak of Paul’s relationship with Timothy later on, but first, let’s make a few observations about Timothy.

According to Luke here in Acts 16, Timothy’s mother was Jewish, but his father was Greek, which means Timothy was likely raised as neither. Here’s why I say that: according to Jewish law, inter-marriage between a Jew and Gentile was forbidden (b. Yebam, 45b), which means that Timothy’s mother was likely either nominally Jewish or she was blatantly defiant of Jewish law and custom when she decided to marry a Greek gentile. We also know from the text here that Timothy was never circumcised, which means according to Jewish custom, he was an apostate and he would have not been welcome in the Jewish synagogue. However, when Paul comes to Lystra and presents the Gospel, and when Paul is stoned and then returns to the city to continue the work of the ministry, Timothy’s mother and grandmother become believers in Jesus. We know this because Paul speaks of Timothy’s mother (Eunice) and grandmother (Lois) as we read in 2 Timothy 1:5, where Paul writes, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well.” Paul writes later in 2 Timothy 3:15 that Timothy has been acquainted with the sacred writings from childhood, which suggests that even if Timothy was not formally raised as a Jew, his mother or his grandmother made a point of teaching him the scriptures since he was a child, and particularly following their decision to follow Jesus.

When Timothy gives his life to Christ, I think we can safely assume that Timothy’s faith catches fire, and he goes all in as young believers are known to do! His youthful energy combined with the heritage of his praying grandmother and mother positions Timothy to be a next-generation leader. When Paul discovers that Timothy has become known as an inspirational leader and servant of Jesus, and that his reputation extends all the way up to the church in Iconium, Paul does not hesitate: he invites Timothy to join him and Silas on their journey to spread the gospel.

Now let’s pause for just a minute. What we see happen here in the first century is extremely relevant for where we are today as a local church, and where we are as the church in the 21st century. Consider Paul’s methodology of leadership. When Paul set out on the first missionary journey, he chose a seasoned, veteran leader in Barnabas, and they took a long a young apprentice, John-Mark. Now, on the second missionary journey, Paul chooses a seasoned ministry veteran, Silas, but what is he missing? The young apprentice, right? So when Paul meets Timothy, he sees a young man who can complete the team. Now...why bring young, inexperienced people into key positions of leadership and mission? I’ll give you three reasons.

1) The best way to learn is on the field, right? Paul knows that if Timothy will travel with him and Silas, he will learn by doing. He will learn by Paul and Silas’s example. Mentorship has
always been a PRIMARY means of discipling people and raising up leaders. That is not only true in the church, consider the medical field. You always see a young med student tagging along with a seasoned physician. Why? Because there is only so much you can learn in the classroom…the rest is learned on the field.

2) The second reason we invite young people into key positions of leadership is because there are some things that young people can do better than old people! For example, young people can relate better to young people, and Paul knows that. He knows that if he hopes to reach the next generation for Christ, he must have a next generation leader on the team.

3) Veteran leaders can learn a lot from young leaders, particularly when it comes to translating the Gospel to the next generation. I can tell you even at the tender age of 47 that I am having to learn all over again how to translate the gospel to millennials, and the best way for me to learn that language is to have a millennial sitting beside me as often as possible.

One of the values I am passionate about here at Colonial is exactly what we see presented in the text: those of us who are seasoned ministry leaders must invest in a “Timothy” whenever possible, to the degree that we bring next-generation leaders along and include them at the highest levels of leadership. If we have any hopes of passing on the Gospel to the next generation, we must raise up next-generation leaders and give them ball as much as possible.

Now let me speak plainly as to how this pertains to my role here at Colonial. One of the great ironies for Lead Pastors is that we simply can’t win when it comes to our presence in the pulpit! If we occupy the pulpit 50 Sundays in a year, we are justifiably called “pulpit hogs” because we don’t provide opportunities for other voices to be heard and the gifts of young “Timothys” to be developed. If we hand over the pulpit and allow other leaders, and particularly next-generation leaders to lead and develop their gifts, we’re regularly accused of being out of the pulpit too much and not doing our job! Which means, as your Lead Pastor, I will never satisfy you all as my congregation, but I still have to choose in which way I will offend you! So here’s my position on that: I choose to offend some of you by sharing the pulpit and unapologetically equipping and elevating next-generation leaders, because not only does that make sense to me if we hope to see the gospel extend beyond this generation, but according to Acts 16, I believe it follows a biblical example established by Paul and Jesus himself! As I understand the scriptures, my job is not only to preach and teach… my job is also to equip, mentor, and hand off leadership to next-generation leaders. So I would ask for your prayers and your patience as I seek to do my job as your Lead Pastor.

OK, if you think I’m just picking on the old people today, I want you to know that the last part of my message will likely step on the toes of the next-generation leaders here, so everyone can be equally offended by the time I’m done! Look at vss. 3-5, “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany
him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and the elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.”

The tension created in this text is immediately apparent for those of us who have been tracking through Acts. Remember that Paul was adamantly opposed to requiring circumcision for Gentiles as a prerequisite for salvation. That Gentiles do NOT need to undergo circumcision to be saved is in fact the very content of the “decisions” from Jerusalem that Paul and his team are now sharing with the believers they encounter as they go from town to town.

And yet, right here in Lystra, Paul decides to circumcise Timothy.

Why? If Paul is opposed to requiring circumcision among the Gentiles, why does he decide to circumcise Timothy? Now…for those of you young people who do not know what circumcision is, please ask your parents about it at lunch today! They will love that. I’ll sum it up by saying that circumcision was kind of like a “tattoo” that set apart Jewish men from non-Jewish men. (Lunch is going to be so fun for some of you parents today…I’ll look forward to your emails).

Suffice it to say: this is an awkward deal for Timothy and Paul, and based on everything we’ve heard from Paul in the past regarding circumcision, it seems a little hypocritical. So let’s unpack what happens here.

First of all, let’s be clear theologically: Paul is not circumcising Timothy in order that Timothy might be saved…we know that would be fundamentally opposed to what Paul preaches and teaches all throughout his letters in the New Testament. In both Galatians 5 and 6, Paul explicitly states, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.” Which begs the question, then: why would Paul circumcise Timothy, and why would Timothy agree to be circumcised? The answer is in the text: “Because of the Jews who were in those places.” In other words, because Timothy was only half-Jewish, and everyone in that region knew that his dad was a Greek, Timothy’s status as a half-breed would be a constant stumbling block for the Jews they were trying to reach with the Gospel. As I mentioned earlier, as an uncircumcised son born to a Jewish mother, Timothy could not enter the Synagogue because he was considered an apostate by Jewish law and custom (Darrel Bock, Acts, p 523). So, Paul and Timothy agree to have Timothy circumcised in order to remove that potential distraction in their ministry to the Jews.
I hope you can see that Timothy’s decision to be circumcised was an expression of his freedom in Christ…it was not an obligation, nor was it forced upon him. Timothy chose to submit to this cultural expectation so as to earn an audience with those he was trying to reach for Christ.

Let me tell you something…this story speaks to the cost of discipleship, and particularly the cost of Christian leadership and mission. Anyone who is committed to bring the gospel to a particular people group in a particular culture must be willing to freely submit to some elements of cultural norms in order to reach that group of people. Paul states clearly in 1 Corinthians 9 that he became like a Jew to reach the Jews; he became like a Gentile to reach the Gentiles, etc…and he concludes with these words: I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

One of the greatest examples of this kind of Christian leadership and cultural acclamation is our very own Pastor Bob! Bob’s effectiveness in reaching people for Christ and discipling people from all walks of life has been his willingness to enter into particular “cultures” and take on their cultural norms in order to reach them with the Gospel. When he was in the youth ministry, Bob would volunteer to help with a theatre production in order to reach the theater kids. He would go lift weights with the football team in order to reach the football players. When Bob set his sights on reaching kids in the urban core, he moved into the urban core. Even recently Bob took of his shoes and humbly entered into a local mosque in order to express the love of Christ to our Muslim neighbors. Everyone who loves Jesus will have to make similar sacrifices in order to reach various cultures. Unfortunately, in my experience, the group of Christian leaders who resent these kinds of cultural sacrifices the most tend to be the next-generation leaders.

I remember being 26 years old and preaching my first sermon at First Baptist Church in Plymouth, NC. I was the next generation leader in that context, and I was full of vim and vigor. I was young, I was confident, I was a recent graduate of Princeton Seminary, and I was going to lovingly reveal to these old southern people how us Gen X’ers had cracked the code on how to live the Christian life and lead the world to Christ. When I stepped into the pulpit, I fired both barrels and by the time I was finished I was pretty sure we were on the edge of revival!

Later that afternoon, one of the Deacon’s quietly came alongside me and gently stated that when a person spoke from the pulpit in that church, they needed to wear a suit and tie. Well, I had worn a tie, but I didn’t even own a suit, and the cost of buying a new suit was unthinkable given our financial situation as a newly married couple with huge student loans. I remember being completely offended…almost to the degree that I wanted to walk away from the job, and maybe the church all together! After all, who cares about a stupid suit and tie? Did Jesus wear a suit and tie? Gen X’ers hate suits and ties and robes and all that formality! It would be disingenuous for me to wear a suit, I wouldn’t be able to be myself, suits are too hot and stuffy, etc, etc etc.
But you know what? When I complained to my loving mom and dad, they simply said, “If that’s what it takes to be heard by the people in your church, go get a suit.” And they were right. Young leaders need to take Timothy’s example to heart. There are times when we must use our freedom in Christ to lay down our “rights” or our “privilege” in order to reach those within a particular culture who simply won’t hear us if we don’t honor their cultural norms. That was a hard pill for me to swallow, but fortunately for me, a man from our church showed up later that week and gave me four suits that he had outgrown! The Lord provided, and I used those suits right up to the time I turned 40…and then the suits mysteriously shrunk.

My point is simply this: what young leaders often perceive as “conformity” looks differently when we consider Timothy’s willingness to undergo circumcision in order to reach the Jews in that region. Timothy never lost his identity or his freedom as a Jesus-follower, and he was still a next-generation leader, but his willingness to undergo a Jewish cultural norm earned him the opportunity to reach people he would have otherwise not been able to reach.

I hope that will be a lesson for all of us who have been called to reach the world for Christ, and particularly as we continue to live into the BLESS rhythms that we have been learning about this summer. Our mission to bless our neighbors and reach the world for Christ is always costly, personally and congregationally, and it requires some degree of sacrifice by all of us. But let us remember, our sacrifice is always an act of our freedom in Christ, not an obligation that somehow purchases our salvation or earns some merit in the eyes of God. We are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross…we are free…and yet we have been charged to become all things to all people that we might share the blessings of knowing Christ. Amen?

We’ll pick up our story here in Acts 16 next Sunday. Let’s pray.