

BISHOP DELZER'S SERMON

TEXT & SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 7

SCRIPTURE READING: ACTS 15:1-22A

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 favourably 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'. Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

Holy wisdom, holy word.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

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SERMON

In Acts 6 we hear a story about a challenge that faced the early church as it sought to follow Jesus into a changing world. It had to do with the distribution of food to the poor. The Hebrew Christian widows were being better cared for than the Greek Christian widows. In response the people gathered together to discuss this challenge, to discern what it means to follow Jesus into a changing world, to discern what it means to be the church in a changing world. And the Spirit guided them to a solution. They chose seven men, who they believed were equipped by the Spirit, to oversee the distribution of food to the widows and the poor.

One of the crucial things that underlies this action by the early church is their trust that the Spirit would lead them to choose people who are equipped by the Spirit to carry forward into a changing world the message that does not change – *all people are saved by the grace of God and all people are beloved by God.*

In today's reading from Acts 15 we hear about another challenge that faced the early church as it sought to follow Jesus into a changing world – the question of *are we saved by the grace of God? Or is there more that is required?* This was a critical issue for both the Jews and the Gentiles. The earliest Christians were Jews, including even some Pharisees, and most of them continued to observe all of the Jewish food laws and rituals that they believed set them apart as the people of God. As Paul and Barnabas spread the good news about Jesus many Gentiles became Christians. They knew little about the Jewish food laws and rituals. They simply knew about the grace of God that had welcomed them into a relationship with God.

Some of the Jewish Christians, especially those who were also Pharisees, insisted that for those Gentile converts to be true Christians – true people of God – they had to be circumcised and observe all of the Jewish food laws.

So once again the people gathered together to discuss this challenge, to discern what it means to follow Jesus into a changing world, to discern what it means to be the church in a changing world. Listen to some of that process of discernment:

God, who knows the human heart, testified to [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as God did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith God 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 God, just as they will. . . [God's desire is] that all peoples may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles. . . therefore we should not trouble those who are turning to God. . . Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas [to share what had been decided].

Once again the people gathered together to discuss this challenge, to discern what it means to follow Jesus into a changing world, to discern what it means to be the church in a changing world. And once again the Spirit guided them to a solution – they chose men who they believed were equipped by the Spirit to carry forward into a changing world the message that does not change – *all people are saved by the grace of God and all people are beloved by God.*

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One of the things I love about our church still today is that when we are faced with a challenge, we still come together (like we are doing here at this synod assembly) to discern what it means to follow Jesus into a changing world, to discern what it means to be the church in a changing world. And we do this trusting that the Spirit still leads us to choose people who are equipped by the Spirit to carry forward into a changing world the message that does not change – all people are saved by the grace of God and all people are beloved by God.

Today's reading from Acts 15 reminds us that God desires to be in relationship with all people, even those who some might think should be excluded. That's why we must never place any barriers in the path of those who seek a relationship with God. God desires that every possible door be opened, so that every possible person, in every possible circumstance, might be welcomed into a relationship with God that is life giving.

We are going to watch a music video by the singer/songwriter Jason Gray that conveys this message. As we watch and listen notice the people who some might tend to exclude from a relationship with God. Notice the message that they too are saved by the grace of God and are beloved by God. The song is sung as if one is speaking to God.

- Those who are able are invited to watch the Jason Gray music video *Remind Me Who I Am* available at <https://youtu.be/jmEHSPKSwHE>
- Those unable to watch the video are invited to read the lyrics:

*When I lose my way,
And I forget my name,
Remind me who I am.
In the mirror all I see,
Is who I don't wanna be,
Remind me who I am.
In the loneliest places,
When I can't remember what grace is.
Tell me once again who I am to You,
Who I am to You.
Tell me lest I forget who I am to You,
That I belong to You.
To You.
When my heart is like a stone,
And I'm running far from home,
Remind me who I am.
When I can't receive Your love,
Afraid I'll never be enough,
Remind me who I am.
If I'm Your beloved,
Can You help me believe it.
Tell me once again who I am to You,
Who I am to You, whoa.
Tell me lest I forget who I am to You.
That I belong to You.
To You.
I'm the one you love,
I'm the one you love,
That will be enough,
I'm the one you love.
Tell me once again who I am to You.
Who I am to You.
Tell me lest I forget who I am to You,
That I belong to You, oh.
Tell me once again who I am to You.
Who I am to You.
Tell me lest I forget who I am to You,
That I belong to You.
To You.*

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Did you catch the phrase, “[God], if I’m your beloved, can you help me believe it.” And then did you hear the recurring refrain, “Tell me once again who I am to you, who I am to you. Tell me lest I forget who I am to you, that I belong to you.”

Remember, always remember, that each of us here today face those times when we turn to God and ask, “If I’m your beloved, can you help me believe it? Tell me once again who I am to you. Tell me lest I forget who I am to you, that I belong to you.”

Still today, even in this rapidly changing world, we come together to be reminded in word and sacrament that *each of us has been saved by the grace of God, that each of us is beloved by God, that each of us belongs to God.*

Because we belong to God, still today we come together to discern what it means to follow Jesus into a changing world, to discern what it means to be the church in a changing world, and to be reminded that we are the ones who have been chosen and equipped by the Spirit to carry forward into a changing world the message that does not change – *all people are saved by the grace of God and all people are beloved by God.*

Thanks be to God!