

“Cut to the Question”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Acts 15:1-18
May 14, 2017 — Fifth Sunday of Easter

Those of us who believe that the Bible needs to be taken too seriously for it to be taken literally often point to textual contradictions or erroneous pre-science cosmologies to argue against literalism. I think we ought to consider using this passage to make our case instead.

Friends, I need testify. I have been to council meetings. I have been to committee meetings. I have been to presbytery meetings. I have been to the General Assembly of our denomination.

Just this past Thursday, our presbytery met in Auburn, and we spent a half hour arguing about amendments to the PC(USA) constitution. That hardly seems inordinate, until I tell you that these amendments had already received the requisite votes across the nation. We were voting in May instead of February, so our presbytery’s vote was inconsequential. The revised Books of Order have already gone to press, but that did not stop us from wringing our hands and barking at each other and engaging in some Robert’s Rules of Order acrobatics.

I have seen the people of God at work. There is simply no way that a group of church leaders came to a consensus as quickly and cleanly as Luke describes in Acts 15.

But of course they didn’t. The questions they were debating were big ones: *What is required to be connected to this new covenant in Christ? How do we interpret God’s promises and the history of God’s people in a resurrection world? Who is in, and who is out? Who has access to the blessing received by the revelation of the Christ? What kind of community will we, the followers of Christ, be?*

Thank you, Peter and Paul and Barnabas and James, for settling such questions once and for all.

The specific question they face is whether the saving work of Christ extends to those who are not Jews and who never become connected to the law of Israel. It’s circumcision, yes, but more: food and purity laws, and becoming part of the covenant. Jesus, as we were reminded throughout the Gospel of Luke, was firmly Jewish. The earliest Christian communities were steeped in Jewish scripture and tradition. Could Jesus be the Jewish Messiah and also offer salvation unconnected to the Torah?

Paul will tell the tale of this council at Jerusalem a bit differently, but the end result is the same. The church is opened up after testimony is given. In Luke’s account, Peter breaks down the distinction between “us” and “them,” pointing out that God has poured out the Spirit upon the Gentiles as well.

Paul and Barnabas tell of the work that God has done with the uncircumcised through them. James affirms that when God called Abraham, God chose a people — that God is the one who forms community and decides who’s in and who’s out. God is not doing a new thing here with the Gentiles, but rather doing what God has always done: raining down mercy and creating a relationship where none existed before.

And so those at the table see that they have been recipients of the wideness of God's mercy. And they see that God is again at work in extending such mercy to a larger circle of people. They conclude that the life given in the new covenant of Christ came not from the ability of the faithful to live faithfully, but in God's faithfulness to them. If God is making a move here, if God is working beyond Israel, who are they to demand compliance?¹

Just imagine if this debate had gone the other way. If Christianity had remained a sect of Judaism, requiring followers to become Jewish, then receive baptism, it's hard to imagine it would have ever grown the way it did in the centuries following this council. Of course, it seems unlikely Paul would have gone along with that, and we probably would have had the first great schism in church history, right there, with Peter and Paul.

Instead the gates of the church were flung open. The Gospel spread like wildfire among people who heard a message that invited them into a relationship of equality with their neighbors in the sight of God. They were invited to water that claimed them as beloved. They were invited to a table that met beggar and king with the same portion of grace.

This church council meeting changed history. And to us it seems so obvious. Of course God's love is for all who seek and receive it. Of course one doesn't need to follow a particular ritual, or subscribe to a particular code, or do it the particular way that we have always done it.

Right? If we're honest, it would've made a ton of sense to maintain Jewish-Christianity. Abraham and Moses had served well as the key prophets for centuries. These requirements weren't arbitrary. They'd been handed down by God to the ancestors. Upholding this barrier to entry was also faithful to scripture and to the identity of a people who had spent so much time in slavery and then in exile, times when their particular covenant was all that they had to remember who they were.

What if these Gentiles try to change the way we worship? What if they raise uncomfortable questions? What if they act weirdly? What if they don't decide to fit in? Maintaining the barrier would surely have made sense.

But it would not have fit their experience of Jesus — Jesus the itinerant rabbi, Jesus the prophet, Jesus the seeker of the lost, Jesus the threat to the political and religious order, Jesus the crucified Lord, Jesus the risen Christ.

So many councils of the church have been held since this one — big councils through the early centuries and into the Medieval era and as part of the Protestant Reformations and beyond, all the way to denominational gatherings today. But also small councils, as congregations and regional bodies have come together to make decisions. And so many times over the centuries, barriers to entry have been on the agenda. We Christians really like trying to determine who is in and who is out. That question seems entrenched at the heart of our faith, even as we have so much evidence of what Christ himself would say.

¹ <https://clergystuff.com/daily-devotions/2017/5/14/acts-151-18-council-at-jerusalem>

Over the past year-and-change, my heart has broken for my Methodist friends and colleagues who have felt deep pain as the councils of their church repeatedly dead-bolted the door to expressions of faithful service and love by LGBTQ+ Christians.

It's tempting to stand with pride as the Presbyterian Church (USA) has — deliberately and decently and in order — removed these kinds of barriers. Over the past decade, our denomination has opened the door to ordination in all offices of the church, and then done the same for the way we describe marriage. And efforts continue to ensure that the PC(USA) seeks yet more light in rooting out barriers to entry for the faithful who seek to follow Christ.

This is all to be celebrated — and we sure do that here at Edgewood — but vigilance is needed, because those barriers to entry will sneak up on you. Even members of a congregation like this one are prone to the trap of deciding that if you don't agree with the way we think, the welcome we extend will be only as deep as a smile and a handshake. We certainly won't worry about circumcision, but it sure is tempting to make more informal barriers: the way you dress, the way you raise your kids, the way you spend your free time, the way you express your faith.

Churches always want new people, but: What if these newbies try to change the way we worship? What if they raise uncomfortable questions? What if they act weirdly? What if they don't decide to fit in? When a new person enters as our guest, and we've got questions like that, we would be wise to ask if Jesus did any of those things. Tried to change the way we worship? Check. Raised uncomfortable questions? Check. Acted weirdly? Oh you better believe it. Wasn't interested in fitting in? Yes.

It's inevitable, really, that we'll fall short of fully extending the open and unconditional love that we proclaim is given to us. We are human, after all.

But we are humans with a pretty good story about gates being flung open in recognition of the Spirit's movement, and Christ's welcome, and God's prerogative in choosing to say "Yes" over and over again. And we are humans who talk about death and resurrection and beloved-ness in the waters of baptism. And we are humans who revel in a mystery found at a table of grace, where we, with all our foibles, invite, invite, and invite those who want to know more about Christ to find him in a simple meal shared with others. We are humans with a story that reminds us constantly that it is God who makes our community, who calls us together, who enters into covenant, and who is doing an old thing with the people of God. Amen.