

## **Acting Out: Meanwhile, Back in Jerusalem** Sunday, 8/19/18

**1** We're continuing our journey through the book of Acts today, remembering that we're on a journey of letting the Holy Spirit rekindle the passion, power, and purpose of our church as we grow in acting out the Good News in this world. Acts is all about God's forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and the mission of sharing both with the world. We are sacred agents for Jesus, sharing the Good News of Jesus in deed and word, out loud for the world to see and hear.

**2** If I asked you what I meant by the "Good Book," you'd be justified in assuming that I meant the Bible. But there's another book that's important in the life of the United Methodist Church that you might not have seen before: The Book of Discipline. How many of you have either seen or heard about our Book of Discipline? This "good book" represents the covenant that all United Methodists, world-wide, agree to live by. It's revised every four years at the General Conference of the United Methodist Church. If you're good at math, then you'll see that the next Book of Discipline will be coming out in 2020. Incidentally, the 2020 General Conference will be in Minneapolis! Some of you are already hard at work helping to knit some of the 10,000 purple scarves the Dakotas and Minnesota Annual Conferences are preparing as a hospitality gift to the General Conference delegates.

I'm showing you a Book of Discipline and talking about the General Conference because there are some similarities between what's happening in the United Methodist Church in these days and the situation we read about in Acts 15. The early church had the Scriptures- the Torah, the Writings, and the Prophets, but as they grew and became something distinct from their Jewish roots, they also needed their own living, evolving, Book of Discipline, something that clearly set out the parameters of the covenant that the members of the church had with each other. Before we get to some possible changes to the 2020 Book of Discipline, let's first rejoin the disciples gathered at the Jerusalem Council. I'm picking up the story in Acts 15:22.

**{Read Acts 15:22-31 (NLT)}.**

**3** If you thought long church meetings were a modern invention, Acts 15 is proof that they existed from the very beginning of the church. Their debate concerned something that we still debate today: What are the requirements for being a Christian? Understand that the

church at this point was already made up of different factions, but at one extreme were those who had been Pharisees, like Paul, experts in the Jewish Scriptures and Law. These were people who could trace their biological lineage back to Abraham and lived their entire lives with the goal of perfectly keeping God's requirements as they saw them in their Scriptures. They had accepted Jesus as their Messiah, but they didn't see any reason to abandon the requirements for being a Jew, at least as they understood them. If you want to contextualize their perspective to the modern Church, it would be a bit like being baptized a Christian, going through Sunday School and Confirmation, going to Seminary, and becoming a pastor or a Sunday School teacher. They had an extensive understanding of the "right" way to be a Jew that they had lived with all their lives.

On the other extreme, there were the new Gentile believers, people who grew up observing none of the rituals and dietary habits of the Jews, including none of the learning of the Scriptures. Their experience was limited to either the teachings heard in synagogues, the teachings of Jesus himself, or the teachings of one of the Apostles.

What was the problem? The Pharisees couldn't let go of the rules that prohibited them from even sharing a meal with the Gentile believers because the Gentiles were, as a matter of their very birth, ritually "unclean." On the other hand, the Gentiles weren't willing to adopt radical lifestyle changes based on requirements for living that God seemed to be dissolving as no longer necessary. How in the world was the church ever to be one body when it was from its very inception made of people who had such different ideas of Christian normality?

**4** Do you remember Peter's strange dream back in Acts 10? Peter's dream is the key to understanding Acts 15. Remember that Peter refused God's command to eat the unclean animals lowered in the sheet? To which God replied, "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean."<sup>1</sup> In Acts 15, Peter finally understands the full implications of God's reply back in Acts 10. He finally connects the dots between the teachings of Jesus, his vision of the animals in the sheet, and his witness to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles. Do you see it? Listen again to Peter's speech from our earlier reading: "God knows people's

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 10:15, New Living Translation, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.

hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith.”<sup>2</sup> He cleansed their hearts through faith! Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean? Do you see the connection? Peter is finally beginning to understand that it’s not circumcision or who our parents are or even how well we keep the rules that make us a Christian. That was a radical idea back then, and it’s still a radical idea today. Peter said it clearly: “We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

**5** The church has always struggled to understand what it means to be one body of united believers. We know that it’s Christ’s will and plan to offer the Good News to all people. And by “Good News,” I mean exactly what Peter said: “We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.” Undeserved applies to all of us, and it means you and I didn’t earn it and nobody else can earn it. It’s no accident that the United Methodist Church has an open communion table and that we’ve adopted the slogan, “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.” Who are we to say to another person, you’re not welcome into the fellowship of Christ because you haven’t earned it?

On the other hand, we hold the truth of grace in tension with the truth that Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.<sup>4</sup> Just because our hearts, minds, and doors are open doesn’t mean we don’t believe in anything. It doesn’t mean we don’t lift up the Bible as the inspired Word of God. It doesn’t mean we don’t establish norms of behavior in the covenants we have with each other, covenants that offer grace but also expect holiness. The early church faced these same tensions, and they found a solution through compromise- a pared down list of rules that served to ease the way forward for a full communion between the converted Pharisees on the one hand, and the converted Gentiles on the other. For those of you who enjoy a good pork chop on the grill, you can thank the compromise at the Jerusalem Council for paving the way for you!

**6** What might such a compromise look like for the church today? We know that our

---

<sup>2</sup> Acts 15:8-9, Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 15:11, Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:17

Book of Discipline has changed many times and often in significant ways. It wasn't until 1865 that African American preachers were given full clergy rights and the first woman was given a local preaching license. It wasn't until 1900 that women were given full rights as lay members of the church and it took until 1956 for women clergy to be given equal rights in the Methodist Church. The first woman bishop wasn't elected in the United Methodist Church until 1980, and for many years divorce cast a shadow over remarriage, membership in the church, and ordination.

The church has always wrestled with finding unity in the face of issues that threaten division. The issue that's been demanding our attention for the past thirty years or more concerns the language in our Book of Discipline that identifies nontraditional expressions of human sexuality as sinful. You may know that the last General Conference appointed a special commission to find a way forward through our division of thought regarding this issue. The issue is too complex for me to unpack this morning, but I have copied a handout for you, a brief summary of the three ways forward that will be considered by the special session of the General Conference in February 2019. You can find that handout in the lobby. Nobody can say what action the General Conference will take, but be assured that once action is taken, I'll both communicate that to you and provide some forums for us to have respectful conversations with each other about how it might shape our life together as a local church.

For now, I want to challenge you to accept that people of faith, including the people of Buffalo UMC, have differing opinions about a great many things, including sexual norms. It's easy to disparage each other from a distance, or to walk away mad when we disagree. It's easier to dig into our own positions than it is to listen carefully to those with a different experience or a different way of reading the Bible. I know how hard it is to understand other perspectives on this issue, because I've been trying to do just that, especially over the last few years. Please treat each other with love in the things you say about this divisive issue, and trust that when the General Conference acts on our behalf, you'll be invited into some guided and prayerful conversation.

Meanwhile, there are countless other things, potentially less complicated and contentious, that we can choose to practice grace with. Your challenge is to identify one or

more behaviors that bring a frown to your face- something that other individuals, groups, or even religions practice that you don't like. Do hijab's bother you, the headscarves worn by Muslim women? How about body piercings and tattoos? Find at least one thing that you don't like that's honestly more about your discomfort and less about God's will. Then be watching for that behavior. When you see it, stop judging, and let grace prevail.



## *Buffalo United Methodist Church*

*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*



**609 8<sup>th</sup> Street NW  
Buffalo, MN 55313  
763-682-3538**

**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**  
*pastorbill@buffaloumc.com*