

April 28 - Acts 15:1-17 - Narrative Lectionary 082: Council at Jerusalem
28 Apr. 13

“The Gospel Breaks Boundaries”

One of the things I try to do each week is speak a pastoral word, say something that speaks to our personal relationship with God and to our spiritual growth. As I prayed through this Sunday’s reading I didn’t see it addressing either of those things. So after writing some sermon notes, I put at the top “What is the pastoral word?” And then it came to me. The Scriptures are very much about me and God, you and God. They’re also about us and God. They are about our common life in this church. They are about how we live together and about what is our common mission. In particular, this week’s story is about how we find God-pleasing ways to deal with our differences and what is our attitude toward those who are outside our group. I’m pretty sure messages about our personal relationship with God, especially messages that say God is on our side are better received. But it would be wrong, certainly it would be unbiblical, to not speak pastoral words about our common life and our common mission.

So what is our attitude towards outsiders? I think within each of us there are two competing desires. The weaker of those desires is to be in unity and live in peace with all people. The stronger of those desires is to be part of a group and set boundaries of who is in and who is out and to see the world in us against them terms. For example, I love New York, but I hate the Yankees. The Orioles are my team, and on the ballfield it’s definitely us against them, them being the Evil Empire. I could say similar things about the Steelers, but in deference to Terry, I won’t.

The sports analogy is a pretty innocuous one. Baseball and football are just games, and the rivalry, even when passionate, is fun and not very destructive. There are other us against them rivalries that are destructive, even deadly. One tribe battles another. One gang fights for turf from another. One group, one religion sees those who are outside of it as a threat to be battled or eliminated. Violence and death follow.

In our long history, we Christians have been guilty of that. We’ve pretty much matured beyond that now. But I wonder how many people even today are turned away from God by insiders who look upon outsiders as outsiders who somehow just don’t measure up. I wonder how many people have been turned away by insiders who place barriers in the way of people who are seeking God.

The Gospel breaks such boundaries. Philip baptizes an Ethiopian and not just an Ethiopian but an Ethiopian eunuch. Peter sees a vision in which he is invited to eat foods that Jews, unlike those outside their group, their tribe considered unclean. Gentiles like us are brought into the faith without being asked to meet all the requirements of the host tribe. Paul writes that there now is no distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female. Unheard of. And scandalous. Boundaries are broken—all for the sake of growing faith. Shocking to and difficult for many.

But not surprising. This is exactly what Jesus did. He touched the unclean. He kept the law but broke the traditions. He ate with outcasts and was accused—rightly—of being the friend of sinners. His ministry broke boundaries. And we who follow him are called to do the same.

It isn't easy. Most churches, like ours, are pretty homogeneous. We're more comfortable that way. Breaking boundaries wasn't any easier for those first generation Christians than it is for us. The debate they had about whether or not converts needed to keep the laws that defined who they were as good Jews who believed in Jesus was settled so long ago that we forget how gut wrenching it was for them. Paul and his law-free Gospel were asking them to abandon *all* those group defining boundaries.

And they did it. They did it because they saw that it was God who was breaking the boundaries. They see God bringing outsiders to faith in Jesus. They see God giving the Holy Spirit to these outsiders just as he did to them. And they decide they want to keep up with what God is doing in the world and not fight against it. And that is why you and I are here today, receiving the body and blood of Jesus, having our sins forgiven, growing in faith, being strengthened by our relationship with God. Had they decided differently, we might well all be pagans.

Circumcision advocates had Scripture on their side. Maybe they should have won the day. But in this case the literal words of Scripture were trumped by God's own actions through the Holy Spirit in bringing these outsiders to faith and by God's clear desire to save all people. God breaks boundaries. Thanks be to God.

I wonder what this might mean for Living Water Lutheran Church.