

“The Challenge of Change in the Church”

Acts 15: 1-19

A few weeks ago, I preached on change in the church, so I'm not going down that road again with this sermon. We know change happens. We know that despite our best efforts, we can't prevent change from coming our way. We know that change is a part of our lives and our churches. So where do we go now?

The true struggle of the church is not that change happens. The true struggle for the church is how we as modern day disciples deal with and embrace the change. And that is where our text today comes in and gives us direction.

The fascinating thing about our text is that there are really three different conversations happening in that one room of the Jerusalem church which are the same three different conversations that can be found in any church at any time across our nation and world. We have the first group that is afraid of change because they are afraid that they are going to lose their voice and place in the new reality. They are afraid of the unknowns. They are afraid that they will lose their identity, what makes the church their church, if they don't set some rules and boundaries. We can hear these fears in this group's response to the work Paul and Barnabas are doing. We can hear these fears when they say “It is necessary for the

new people to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.” We can hear these fears when they say, “We’ve always done it this way.”

And then we have this second group, lead by Paul and Barnabas, who are sharing stories about how God is working in the lives of people who are outside the house of Israel, who don’t quite fit the mold of the early disciples, who don’t exactly look like the first believers, who don’t understand why they should do something drastic as being cut to prove that they are really experience the Kingdom of God here on earth. Paul and Barnabas are sharing stories about how God is doing a new thing without following the traditional rules and regulations and they are pushing for the early church to think about doing church in a new way, a way that maybe a little uncomfortable, a way that maybe a little out there, a way that has never been tried before.

And so we imagine this room. Or let’s face, we don’t have to imagine it. We’ve all been in board meetings like this where there seems to be two sides to an issue, each side passionately defending or advancing their side, each side wanting a decision, each side wanting to be told that they are correct. We’ve all been in that room just like we find in our text today where there was no small dissension and debate.

And then finally we have the third group, the third conversation. We have the leadership who is listening to each side and they know that they will have to

make a decision, a decision that no matter how they decide, will create winners and losers in this new church, that will create winners and losers in the debate of change meeting tradition, a decision that will create winners and losers and has the potential to divide the church. So whose side do they choose? Who will they say will be the winners? And who will they say will be the losers in this debate?

Well, that's the beauty of our text!

The leadership doesn't choose! Each side wins and each side loses! Because the leadership doesn't listen to the sides. The leadership listens to the Word of God and where it is leading them as a community. The beauty of this text is that there are no real winners or losers. There is only a community of faith discerning where God is calling them.

Which leads us to the fourth conversation that was happening in that room that day and should be happening in all of our churches as well. Our conversation with God and with God's word.

The wider church, ours included, has fallen into the trap of acting like our culture when it comes to decision making. We go with majority rule whether or not it is the right decision for the church. We practice democracy because we assume that it will safeguard against hurt feelings and conflict. We assume that if we take the majority vote, then we can say to the opposing side, "Well, sorry, we took a vote and the majority ruled. So get on board because that is the way it is

happening, whether you like it or not.” But after living with this text this week, I have come to the belief that our practice of democracy in the church only has created more conflict and more hurt feelings and we have totally missed the point of being the church that God calls us to be. We have totally missed out on an opportunity to reflect the Kingdom of God in all and through all that we do. We have tried to be something we are not because let’s be honest with ourselves, we know what happens after the vote. There are winners and there are losers and then after the vote, people still leave upset. They feel like their voice or opinion wasn’t heard. They feel like what they had to say was not valued as much as someone else’s opinion. They feel like they were ignored. And then let’s be even more honest with ourselves, we know what happens after meetings like that, there are all sorts of what we preacher types like to call “parking lot meetings” where people are still feeling angry and start talking which only leads to more bitterness and hurt feelings which only creates more conflict and division in the church.

And that is exactly what our text is calling us not to do. We as the church, as modern day disciples are not called to practice democracy. We are called to practice discernment. We are called to ground ourselves in the Word of God and allow the voice of God to lead us and shape us. We are called to struggle with an issue together as a community, listening to each other, respectfully asking each other if we have thought about the issue this way. We are called to be in

community with one another listening for the Word of God to lead us and help shape us into the people, into the community that we are called to be, people and a community that reflect Kingdom values such as grace and love.

Now, I will admit, that the process of discernment takes longer and it would be and has been a lot easier to say majority rules. But we are called to be the church, to be the Body of Christ here on earth, where everyone has a voice, where everyone has a place, where everyone is welcomed as God's own, where everyone's opinion is valued and respected. We are called to be the church that shows that there are no winners and losers but an opportunity to come to the table as a community and struggle together, listen together, grow together, and let the Spirit of God lead us and guide us.

And that is exactly what our text shows us today. The early church leadership didn't pick sides. They listened for the word of God and realized that God was indeed calling them to ministry to the people outside the house of Israel and then finally admitted that even though, they had always done church that way, it had never really worked for them. They had fallen short of their own rules and regulations and traditions.

This conversation also opened the doors for early church to begin exploring that maybe, just maybe, that there was more than one way to experience the Kingdom of God here on earth. That maybe God was still speaking. That maybe

the church could find a balance of holding to the things that made them them while becoming open to the new ways that God was still working in the world.

That maybe just maybe we as modern day disciples are called to something more than just adapting to our culture but rather we are called to reflect the Kingdom of God in all that we do, including the way we hold our meetings and uncomfortable conversations.

May we always strive to be the church, the community the people that God created us to be where everyone has a voice and everyone has a place. Amen.