

**September 9, 2018**  
**Rev. Dr Tom Blair**

**A Reprise of Acts- Revisiting the Way**      **Acts 15**  
**Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore**

This is the final sermon of our Sizzlin' Summer Series on the book of Acts. Yes, last week we covered the final account in Luke's writings, of Paul's final imprisonment in Rome, but we're not done yet. Today we go back a bit to what is arguably the most important story in the book of Acts. I think I've said this so far about every passage I've preached on in this Summer sermon series, but there are a number of new reasons why this holds true for this passage today.

One reason that would never come to mind in this regard is that this story comes from pretty much the



middle of the book, chapter 15 of 28. Ancient authors, instead of writing toward a final climax of the story at the end of their work, chose to place the most important story right in the middle; then they reinforced it with successive accounts to the final ending of the story.

So as we revisit this story, we are going back to the central thesis, the main point that Luke wants to make to Theophilus to whom he writes these words which are then for all of you- literally, lovers of God.

Another reason that this may well be the most important story in Acts is that without it, we most likely would not be followers of Jesus. We, who are almost all Gentiles here- not born into Jewish families; would have been outside the fold, not related to those included in the covenantal promises of Moses first delivered to 'Jewish Christians' in Palestine. Had this episode not taken place, the Gospel message of Jesus Christ might well not have been extended outside Jewish circles at all.

Had this meeting not happened, we could well be Druids or nature-worshippers, without the moral and ethical structure we rely on in our Judeo-Christian society, never hearing the promise of life made abundant and complete in Jesus Christ.

This is first, then, a foundational story of our Faith, without which nothing else happens. Too often we take these kinds of stories for granted.

It is also a very generous story, extending a promise to more than just a proscribed set of people, reaching out to far more people than ever imagined.

Since we're back in the sanctuary today for this first time since May, I've been thinking about it this way... I had to ask Paul Hume, one of our members and an architect, about this building; how many people it is built to support, and how many people it could accommodate as an illustration for us. He gave me this information... In terms of people this space could support, we can look at it this way:

Starting with the chairs:... They could each probably handle up to a thousand pounds, but the floor may not be able to handle it.  $1000\text{lb} / 4\text{sf} = 250\text{lb per Sq}$ .

Moving to the Pews: Each pew is just over 9', assuming one 6" per person average, you're only looking at 6 people a pew or 24 people per row.

The floors are rated for 100lb sf on average, so it would depend on density. Worship area is  $4417\text{ sf} \times 100\text{ lb per sqft (code)} = 441,700\text{ lbs}$ . then  $441,700\text{ lbs} / 190\text{lbs (a person)} = 2,324\text{ people}$ .

However, based on the number of doors and egress requirements we are looking at a max of:  $\text{Egress} = 4417\text{sf} / 5\text{sf per occupant} = 883\text{ people}$

Without pews and ignoring safety codes, we could probably jam 4000 people into the space of the entire sanctuary however, breathing would be difficult.

The point I'm trying to make with these numbers is that our foundation has far more capacity than we are aware of... that is, in terms of both this building and our faith. We are built for more than we currently are, which fits exactly into the storyline of our passage for today.

The previous chapter ends with the Apostle Paul and Barnabas having completed a journey into Pisidia and Pamphylia, (into what were considered the 'hinterlands' of Asia Minor), where 'the gate had been thrown open' to the Gentiles. All is well... the gospel is spreading, as it should be.

Our story today is all about what is called 'the Apostolic Council' or the 'Council of Jerusalem,' the first and only 'meeting of the minds' of the leaders of the earliest church. This is a story fundamental to who we are as Christians- and of the grace of God that calls us together, but it is a message rarely told. Which is too bad. This is a vastly more important story than we give it credit.

There was clear disagreement, even 'fierce dissension' between the parties; between some who favored circumcision as a necessary requisite for inclusion into the 'fellowship of the Way', and

others who simply didn't see it necessary at all; an unnecessary hindrance and an unfortunate stumbling block.

This wasn't just a question about surgery on male anatomy. If the head of household could not be included in the church, no one would. This was a fundamental question of inclusion; who was in and who was out.

So, in mid 46 AD parties traveled to Jerusalem for this world-changing meeting, Paul and Barnabas on the liberal side, those from the Pharisaic party on the conservative side (we're not given names). The Apostle James, respected by all, was the arbiter, more or less.

Peter started off, recounting the meaning of the vision he experienced of the sheet filled with clean and unclean animals that were presented as acceptable to him, those animals once forbidden to eat were now on the menu! (Acts 10). He could never forget the meaning of the vision that transformed his understanding of the extent of Jesus' love and God's grace. It was just as Jesus had said "It is not what goes into a person's mouth that they are dishonored, but rather what comes out of it." (Matthew 15:11.)

Another way of looking at Peter's perspective may be like someone standing on the sidewalk trying to argue about whether or not their new neighbor has met the approval requirements for a mortgage while you are watching them move into their new house. Peter basically tells the Pharisees: if you open your eyes, you'll see that the deal is done. They have been approved by God through faith alone, and they've already moved in!

Then Paul and Barnabas shared their stories from Galatia and the 'hinterlands' of miracles and conversions beyond their wildest expectations.

Then an interesting thing happens. Leadership steps up and people listen. Though Jesus himself is not present, James, sometimes called the brother of the Lord, is clearly seen as the leader of this assembly. He listens carefully and sums up the discussion, deciding on his own and being accepted by all, ever since. (And when has that ever happened before?)

The question facing the Council was if the Gospel could be rightly preached and accepted among non-Jews and those who had never been law-observant. Jesus himself was a Jew and the earliest Christian communities were steeped in Jewish scripture and tradition, particularly in and around Jerusalem, where James presided as the first 'proto-bishop'. Could Jesus be the Jewish Messiah and yet bring salvation to those apart from the Law?

James answered the question decisively, citing the prophet Amos, embracing an inclusiveness to all people who hear the word of the Lord.

And so it was decided that God's word of salvation should be shared with all, everywhere- 'even to the ends of the earth' (as Jesus himself put it.) So Paul, Barnabas and others were sent back up to Galatia and other places to spread the word of God. Had this decision not been made, who knows what would have happened to the Gospel message? We likely wouldn't be here.

This was a win-win decision for all. For Jewish Christians, they could continue practices within their tradition, customary and appropriate for them. For Gentile Christians, they would simply be asked to refrain from immorality, eating blood and meat previously sacrificed in idol worship. (Footnote: though these seem like reasonable restrictions, the 2nd Century church historian Tertullian recounts numerous times when Christians were persecuted and forced to eat blood-pudding. Eventually, as many of you know, the ban on eating blood has long since been forgotten.)

Key to all of this is that the earliest church did not splinter or fall apart over such a monumental decision. From a strong and sure foundation came a decision for inclusiveness that all could understand and accept. The openness of the conversation freed them from dissension as well as excessive legalism and compulsiveness that may well have stalled the movement altogether. It also provided a concrete, easy-to-follow example that could be understood by all. The Gospel means yes, not no. It means welcome, not maybe. It means more avenues ahead, not fewer. The potential divisions that could have occurred instead became opportunities for new growth and expansion of the mission of the church.

This foundational decision is still alive and active today, whether we realize it or not. God in Christ has made a decision for all of us. (This is the Christian doctrine of Election.) It is a decision, made from the foundation of the world, embodied in the call to Abram and Sarah, long before Moses, to people unaware of their deservedness, but ready to follow. It is the beginning of the story of God's people, made new. It is our story, too.

So it is that the end is a new beginning. We recognize that God calls all who believe, and as we celebrate that we are part of the body of Christ, we extend that same welcome to one and all, in Jesus' name. Amen.