

"Act with Creativity"

ACT UP - Small Group Campaign Fall 2017

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North East United Methodist Church

Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. 3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

-Acts 15:1-12

"The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

-Acts 15:23-29

I remember a story I heard a long time ago about a young girl was watching her mother bake a ham for a family gathering and noticed her mom cutting off the ends before placing it in the oven.

“Mom, why do you cut the ends off before baking the ham?” she asked.

“Hmmm...I think it helps soak up the juices while it’s baking. I’m actually not sure, though. That’s just the way your grandma always did it, so I’ve just always cut them off. Why don’t you call grandma and ask her?”

The little girl phoned her grandma and asked “Grandma, mom is making a ham and cut off the ends before placing it in the oven. She said that it’s probably to help soak up the juices but wasn’t sure. She said you’d know because she learned how to cook from you.”

“That’s true. I do cut off the ends of the ham before baking. But I’m actually not sure why either. I learned how to cook from my mom. You should ask her.”

So, the inquisitive little girl called her great grandmother and asked “Great grandma, mom and grandma said they learned how to cook a ham from watching you. Do you cut off the ends of the ham to help it soak up the juices?”

The great grandmother chuckled. “Oh, no sweetie. I just never had a pan big enough to hold a whole ham, so I always had to cut off the ends to make it fit.”

Often we hold to certain traditions, act in certain ways, based on things we were taught...these behaviors become ingrained in us...part of who we are. There are certain things we do and certain things we like based on our family history and our personal experiences. We have certain ways of doing things and often we do not like it when our ways, our thinking, our preferences, are challenged. This makes us feel uncomfortable...puts us on the defensive.

Yet, one message that is clear throughout the scriptures is that God is always doing a new thing.

Isaiah 43:18-19 - ***“Do not call to mind the former things, Or ponder things of the past. Behold, I will do something new, Now it will spring forth; Will you not be aware of it?”***

The whole message of the Gospel is God doing something new in us.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV) - ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here."***

God does not want us to allow our preferences to get in the way of what He is about to do in our lives. Therefore, we must understand the difference between preferences, our traditions, and convictions.

According to the U.S. Supreme Court, a preference is a very strong belief, held with great strength. You can give your entire life in a full-time way to the service of the preference, and can also give your entire material wealth in the name of the belief. You can also energetically proselytize others to your preference. You can also want to teach this belief to your children, and the Supreme court may still rule that it is a preference.

A preference or tradition is a strong belief, but a belief that you will change under the right circumstances. Circumstances such as: 1) peer pressure, 2) family pressure, 3) lawsuits, 4) jail, 5) threat of death; would you die for your beliefs?

A conviction is a belief that you will not change. Why? A person believes that God requires it of them. Preferences aren't protected by the constitution. Convictions are.

In our readings this week in the Book of Acts, the early church has to come to a decision whether to turn people away from Christ in order to keep their preferences in tact. The early church has to decide between what is preference and what is conviction, what is non-negotiable. The early church has to recognize that God is "*doing a new thing*" and is challenging them to change so others may know Jesus.

Persecution is continuing against the early church. James, brother of John, becomes the next Christian martyr, when he is put to death by the sword.

Paul and Barnabas, sent by the Holy Spirit, take their 1st Missionary Journey, taking the message of Jesus Christ to the island of Cyprus, and to several major cities in Galatia.

Paul and Barnabas end their 1st Missionary Journey where it began in Antioch, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. Antioch is where the believers were first called "Christians." When they arrive, Paul and Barnabas discover that some Jewish Christians from Judea were beginning to teach believers, *"Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved"* (Acts 15:1).

So the Antioch church decided to send delegates to Jerusalem to get a decision from the apostles and elders. James, one of Jesus' brothers, had become the recognized leader of the church in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus' resurrection. Ancient historian, Josephus, would later record that James was put to death for his faith by the Jewish priest in Jerusalem.

But in 50 AD, James sat and oversaw the first church council...



...to discuss whether or not Gentiles, non-Jews, who came to believe in Jesus, had to conform to Jewish law.

Acts 15:1-12 - *Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.*

The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the

apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

James listened to the debate. Many did not believe Gentiles could be saved and become members of the people of God without accepting the obligations of Jewish law. Furthermore, how could Jewish Christians, observing the law, have fellowship with Gentiles who did not observe the law and were considered unclean. Gentiles and Jews coming together at the communion table was a problem.

James listened to Paul and Barnabas' testimony about how the Gentiles opened their hearts to Christ, how the Holy Spirit came upon them...They share the core truth, conviction, of our faith, *"But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus"* not by following the law...

James, a Jewish Christian, who followed the law of Moses, quotes the prophet Amos and shows evidence that God's prophets had predicted the conversion and inclusion of the Gentiles...they should be accepted without

requiring them to practice Judaism...nevertheless, some kind of compromise had to be made...some type of creative approach...to not offend the consciences of strict Jewish Christians and to provide a way for Jew and Gentile to commune with one another...A decision was made...a letter was written to the Christians in Antioch...

Acts 15:23-29 - ***With them they sent the following letter:
The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:***

Greetings,

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

The Jerusalem Council was a major turning point as the Gospel was unleashed from Jewish law. James and the Council wrote, "*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials*"...

There were three essentials the Council communicated to the Christians in Antioch...

- (1) **Abstaining from eating food offered to idols.** Often sacrifices were offered to Greek and Roman gods, but only a small part of the offering was sacrificed...the rest was used for a feast with friends or was given to the priests who often sold it on the open market...

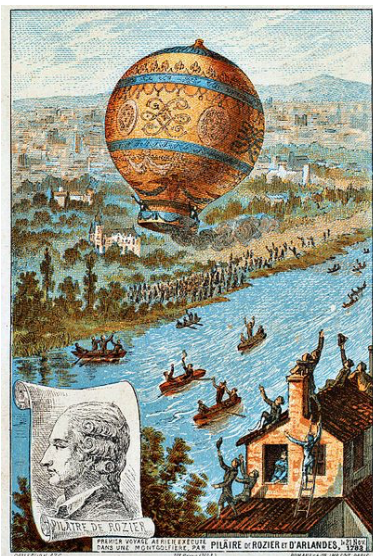
- (2) **Abstaining from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals.** To Jews, blood was life and life belonged to God alone. Leviticus 17:14 - "...*For the life of every creature is in its blood.*" Therefore, all Jewish meat had the blood drained off.

(3) **Abstaining from sexual immorality.**

Had these simple regulations not been observed, there could not have been a relationship between Jews and Gentiles. And even these regulations were given to the Christians in Antioch from the leaders of the church for the good of the church, not as a requirement of salvation. The Council writes, "*If you do such things, you will do well.*"

God was "*doing a new thing*" and the church leaders were open to the Holy Spirit moving in new ways...they did not allow the church to get stuck in a rut...they were able to navigate the difference between traditions, one's preferences, and essentials, one's conviction...James, a devout Jew, known for his commitment to keeping the law, was able to set aside his own personal preferences for the sake of the Gospel...

On June 4, 1783 at the market square of a French, not far from Paris, a smoky bonfire on a raised platform was fed by wet straw and old wool rages. Tethered above, straining its lines, was a huge taffeta bag 33 feet in diameter.



In the presence of "*a respectable assembly and a great many other people,*" and accompanied by great cheering, the balloon was cut from its moorings and set free to rise majestically into the noon sky. Six thousand feet into the air it went -- the first public ascent of a balloon, the first step in the history of human flight. It came to earth several miles away in a field, where it was promptly attacked by pitchfork-waving peasants and torn to pieces as an instrument of evil!

Many times God doing a new thing challenges us. We have our preferences. When the new thing is different...a praise band verses a choir...or suddenly accepting a group of people whom we were taught to have prejudice against...or new technology...the pastor wearing blue jeans verses a suit and tie...or new generations looking at things differently...these new ideas, new ways of doing things, these changes, can upset us and we can look at them as downright evil.

Preferences. I remember, while serving my church in Seaford, Delaware, when we began to allow people to bring coffee and food into the sanctuary during worship...when young adults began to join us, wearing their hats in worship...There was such an uproar you would have thought the core of our faith in Jesus Christ was being attacked and torn down, that the world was going to end.

My son, Nate, once talked to me about something he learned studying at Hillsong in Australia...he shared how he was taught that we need to always be aware of the difference between dogma, doctrine, and preference. Dogma are those aspects of our faith that are non-negotiable...for example, the truths found in the Apostles Creed...Doctrine are those aspects of our faith that are specific to the United Methodist Church...other denominations may believe slightly different, have slightly different doctrines...for example, how one views communion and baptism...these are areas we need to wrestle with at times...then there are our Preferences...our opinions...what we like and dislike...these we need to be open to God challenging us to change...

When our preferences or traditions are getting in the way of others being attracted to and hearing the message of Jesus Christ...when our preferences and traditions are getting in the way of God doing a new thing in our lives...like James and the Jerusalem Council we need to step back, determine what are the non-negotiables, the essentials, and be willing to let go of certain preferences for the sake of others. You want to turn a young adult away from the church...make sure they don't return...tell them to take their hat off when they come in the sanctuary...

It's not always easy...but as with the Jerusalem Council...and the message of Christ moving rapidly throughout the Gentile community...the ramifications of our sacrifice can often be instrumental in helping others know Jesus...and helping ourselves live into the blessings and purpose God has for us.

Rev. Pevey, in the *ACT UP* study, asks some poignant questions:

Are we keepers of the status quo or are we open to the work of the Holy Spirit in unexpected and new ways?

How can we be more open to the movement of the Holy Spirit when it seems to conflict with our traditions and preferences?

Where do we need to set aside our own personal preferences for the sake of the gospel, for the good of the church?

In what ways are we as a church stuck in a rut of "we've always done it this way"? What area of our church would we like to see revitalized? What if we did something totally new, different?

What areas of your own life are stuck in a rut..."I've always done it this way"... "I've always been this way"...What if you did something totally new, different?

Let us think hard about these questions...let us take time in self-examination...let us learn to sacrifice our preferences in order to allow others to be open to the Word of God and to allow ourselves to be open to God doing a new thing in our lives...



Isaiah 43:19 - *"Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."*