

April 30, 2023

We are changed, Because of You

Acts 2:42-47

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Visiting: St. Michael's and All Angels, Lincoln Park

*Peter preached. Peter preached, and on that day 3000 people responded to his pleas, 3000 people were baptized. They committed themselves to the teachings of the apostles, to a life together, the common meal and prayers. And people were in awe, of all that was happening.*

It's all kind of amazing, a couple of months after Jesus is crucified, died, buried, and now risen. He has left his disciples, now the apostles are back in the upper room and the Holy Spirit comes to them, the wild wind of God blowing through their lives and the early movement of the church is beginning.

People are coming. People are believing. But is any of this what the apostles thought it would be? Is any of this what the Jewish people thought Jesus' ministry might be, the religious authorities of the day, is this what they thought should be happening? The Romans, what did the Romans think of all of this? Were all the people of power and authority thinking, ignore this for now, hopefully the hysteria and hoopla dies away...

What of the ones who were there?

Parthians, Medes, Immigrants from Rome, Jews, Cretans and Arabs...(Acts 2:11b), what was it like for all of these people from different cultures to be with one another? In the beginning we are told that all were "*Joyful and exuberant.*" (Acts 2:46)

But later there begins to be push back, the folks who had been with the movement from the beginning, people who were Jewish by birth, wondering and resisting the Gentiles who were joining. Should they not also reframe from eating that which is ritually unclean? (Acts 10:9-15) Should they not also be circumcised? (Acts 15) Shouldn't these new converts follow all of the traditional rules?

As time goes on the uneasiness is voiced. The communities following Jesus in Antioch and other gentile cities are flourishing. The stories of their growth abound. So, some faithful followers of Jesus, Jews from Judea, arrive at a gentile community and say to the disciples Barnabas and Paul that the faithful gentiles, the faith-filled gentiles must be circumcised, they must follow the old way. Paul and Barnabas openly disagree, conversation ensues. (I love reading that phrase in vestry minutes. Because then I know some frank opinions were actually expressed.)

In response to that frank conversation the gentile community, Paul and Barnabas and the emissaries from Judea decide that a few should journey to Jerusalem and meet with the Apostles and leaders in Jerusalem and put to them these very same questions.

This very issue is explored in detail in the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. The questions are raised, and here too a wonderful debate ensues. There is joy that new people have heard the words of Jesus and their lives are forever changed, for this is what Jesus has hoped and commanded. Yet there is also consternation and sadness that the new people who have joined, have not embraced all of the old ways. Upon hearing this point, the apostle Peter stands and says, *“We know from early on that God wanted these outsiders to hear the Good news. And we know that God has given them the Holy Spirit, just as God gave the Holy Spirit to us. Let us not burden our new members with rules and requirements that have sometimes burdened us.”* The apostle James then points out, that God has said early on that this was indeed God’s plan. (Acts 15:18).

So the apostles and teachers, gathered at what is now know as the Council of Jerusalem, decide to write a letter to the gentile communities, welcoming them, telling them they do not need to follow the older requirements of refraining from some unclean foods, nor do the men and boys among them need to be circumcised. Instead, they write, keep the important rules, refuse food offered to idols and engage only in moral conduct, these are the rules to which you must abide. (Acts 15:29)

I wonder in communities of faith some 2000 years later if these words from the book of Acts might have resonance and meaning? As it was then, as it is now, what happens when the people whom God calls to be faithful and filled with the Holy Spirit are not the people we expected?

I know every single one of our communities of faith, longs to have more people join them for worship. It is a universal desire. But I often wonder if congregations that have growth and do welcome people new to their communal life, if they don’t sometimes find themselves wondering what they may have gotten themselves into.

For some who come, may not understand or intuit our written and unwritten rules and ways of being.

Siblings who are new, may not have the words of our service lodged in the synapses of their souls.

Siblings who are new, may not know how to manage a prayerbook, hymnal and bulletin.

Siblings who are new may come with more pronouns than you know what do with, or dress in ways you have not encountered.

Siblings who are new, may not know that all of you pretty much sit the same place ever single Sunday.

Siblings who are new, may not know that it’s just fine for their kids to make noise and quietly play in the pews, (is it? Be honest.) So, they may have extreme anxiety worrying over what their children may do. Or they may not notice that their little ones are rambunctious...is that ok?

Siblings who are new, may be overwhelmed with your welcome and may only want to sit down quietly, and be left on their own, skidding in, praying and skipping out. (Is it Ok for your community to be a momentary place of refuge?)

Or Siblings who are new, may be waiting for you to say, "Hi" and grateful when you hand them an open hymnal turned to the proper page.

Siblings who are new, will bring their own histories and experiences with them, they will, if they continue to enjoy praying with you, they will alter and change your community and in turn be touched and changed by your community. Is that ok with you?

In the early church many came and all were filled with awe and wonder. Later on, differences emerged and concerns arose as communities faced the possibility of changing. We are here today, I believe precisely because the people of the communities of old, the people and the leaders of old, said "yes" you are welcome "yes" we can change and yes all of us will be altered and transformed by God's Love and the power of God's Holy Spirit. God will call all of us to grow and change to be together, and then be open to others.. over and over..

As it was then, may it be so now.

Amen.