

Sermon 23.08.20

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Acts 14: 1-7

The same thing occurred in Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them. But the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to maltreat them and to stone them, the apostles learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country; and there they continued proclaiming the good news.

Background to scripture:

Last week we were in chapter 10 of the book of Acts, and looked at the story of Gentiles being fully welcomed into fellowship with this Jewish band of Jesus followers. Cornelius received a vision, telling him to go find Peter. Nothing more - just bring this man to your home.

Peter, too, had a vision, a sheet full of all sorts of animals, clean and unclean, and heard a voice instructing him: Get up, kill and eat.

Both Cornelius and Peter listened, asked questions, and were amazed as the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard Peter's message.

These outsiders were baptized and received into the body of Christ.

The story goes on - the faithful were scattered because of persecution - with the word of Christ now being spread to Jew and Gentile alike.

Saul was brought to Antioch, a largely Gentile community, with the word spreading and the church growing.

But the troubles didn't stop coming. Arrests, imprisonment, killings continued.

Just before our reading today, Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch, preaching the saving power of Jesus, with many from all religious backgrounds following them.

We're told 'the next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul.' (Acts 13: 44-45)

With Gentiles eagerly soaking up this message of love and forgiveness, some of the Jews - men and women - incited violence and drove them out of the region. So, scripture says, filled with joy and the Holy Spirit, they shook the dust off their feet in protest and went to Iconium, about a 90 mile journey from Antioch.¹

P 898 in the pew bible.

¹Wall, Robert W., contributor. 2015. *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary IX: Acts*. Abingdon Press, Nashville TN. P 152.

SERMON

(SLIDES)

There are so many rich and vibrant stories in the book of Acts - we could have read about Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison, or the run-in with a magician. But we chose to focus on the nitty-gritty work of spreading the gospel, of forming community, all in the midst of danger and death.

We chose this scripture to give us an opportunity to wrestle with some big questions that seem relevant to the book of Acts and equally relevant to life today:

(SLIDE)

How do we live into our differences with other believers?

How do we stay connected to others while claiming our truth?

How do we decide which truths we can live with, and which divide?

By some estimates, it took 400 years for Christianity and Judaism to work out discrete identities.² Here we are, in these stories of Acts, in the early years of these communities in flux.

Acts is an ongoing story of this group of Jesus followers sorting out the core message of the risen Christ. It's messy - they need to be open to surprise and new ways of living into this expansive call to love the neighbor.

These questions - of how we live with difference, were present both within this new Christian community, and definitely coming from outside of it.

In order for these early spreaders of the gospel to remain connected, with so much change - welcoming gentiles, welcoming eunuchs, a willingness to eat food of all sorts...they needed a core message that was the center of their community. It went something like this:

*According to the prophecy of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus of Nazareth is God's Messiah, the savior, who redeems us and shows us the way, through his life, his death and his resurrection.*³

That they all agree on. That's the core, the center.

It strikes me that the Jewish system of belief and behavior was what might be referred to as a bounded set, and the new community, the followers of Christ, now known as Christians, was a centered set.

² Florer-Bixler, Melissa. 2021. *How to have an enemy: righteous anger and the work of peace*. Herald Press, Harrisonburg VA. P 123.

³ Wall, Robert W., contributor. 2015. *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary IX: Acts*. Abingdon Press, Nashville TN. P 13.

So what is Bounded and Centered Set thinking? Let's use an analogy of fences and wells. (SLIDE)

If you are a farmer with a small ranch, you can build a fence to keep your cattle in and other animals out. This would be a Bounded Set. It's clear who's in and who's out.

But if you are a rancher with a huge amount of land and acreage you wouldn't be able to build fences around your whole property. (SLIDE) So instead of building fences, you dig wells. It's assumed that the animals won't go too far away from the well, because their life literally depends on them not wandering too far away from their water source. The cattle have access to what sustains and nourishes them, but so do others. The ecosystem of this model is more diverse.

Religiously, (SLIDE) the bounded church is a set of people clearly marked off from those who do not belong to it. Communities mark themselves in a variety of ways. Purity laws, circumcision, ways of eating - these were markers in the early Jewish community of Acts. They determined who's in and who's out. Boundaries.

The early believers (SLIDE) are more of a centered set. Rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn't, a centered set is defined by its core values. People are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further away from the center.⁴

So, a centered set is about direction. Which way are you headed? (SLIDE) Are you heading towards the center, the core values of the community, or are you heading somewhere else?

For those early believers, redemption was found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The center was clear. Life is found through following Jesus' call to love God and love neighbor.

The edges - the boundaries, they were becoming less and less distinct.

Christ is the center; live in ways according to his teachings.

(BLANK SLIDE)

But what does that look like for us today?

To come back to those original questions - **How do we live into our differences with other believers? How do we stay connected?**

In her book *How to Have an Enemy*, (IMAGE) Melissa Florer-Bixler points to the center - the core to how we are to live, writing: "We are called to unfold our lives into the gospel, our whole lives, aligning our lives with the marginalized - knowing that this is what sets us all free."⁵

Unfolding our lives into the gospel - aligning with the marginalized as a way to all be free.

Yes!

⁴ <https://veritas.community/veritas-community/2013/03/13/bounded-set-vs-centered-set-thinking>

⁵ Florer-Bixler, Melissa. 2021. *How to have an enemy: righteous anger and the work of peace*. Herald Press, Harrisonburg VA. P 24.

A week ago Friday three of us from (IMAGE) Centre County Interfaith Coalition for Gun Safety (boy, that's a mouthful) - Anne Ard, ordained in the Presbyterian church, Josh Wretzel, from Congregation Brit Shalom, and I, met with Pennsylvania Senator Cris Dush, in his Bellefonte office.

We went as Centre county people of faith, wanting to hear from Senator Dush, (IMAGE) one who speaks boldly of his faith in Jesus, wanting to talk with him about his stance on gun violence and gun laws. Dush has previously said that focusing on guns as the source of violence in the United States is misguided; that guns are pieces of equipment and not the actual problem. During his time in the Pennsylvania house of representatives, and now as a senator, he has not supported any legislation to keep our communities safer from guns.

How does he reconcile his faith with his stand on the protections of gun rights? We asked.

"God is a God of relationship" he began. Yes. On that we could all agree.

During our nearly hour long conversation, there were few other points we seemed to agree on.

I found myself growing increasingly frustrated, needing to remind myself that this was a first visit.

Relationship building and listening was a key focus.

Where could we find common ground, rooted in a faith in the God of mercy and justice that we share?

How to stay centered in Jesus, the one who came to bring new life, abundant life for all, and connect?

Florer-Bixler writes:

(SLIDE) "[The] failure to disassociate our faith from our political lives is called tribalism. (SLIDE) We can remedy tribalism with open-mindedness to the complicated nature of individual human beings; we can listen across the divides to see what we can create in a new space outside 'politics as usual.'"⁶

We are complicated human beings, for sure. Senator Dush fervently believes that bringing Christian prayer back into schools is one of the fundamental ways of bringing about change. He focuses much of his attention there.

(BLANK SLIDE) Listening across the divides. Connecting with God and with one another - not easy work. The work of building relationships takes time, and listening for the places of connection outside of the division is a starting place.

In that conversation, Mr. Dush shared the pain of a violent death in his family. That loss was present, and tender. Bringing that piece of his own life to the conversation changed the tenor of the meeting - we all know pain, on that we could sit in solidarity. And from that we asked him to consider tightening specific gun legislation. We all want safety.

⁶ Ibid. P 23.

How do we decide which truths we can live with, and which divide?

As I read in the book of Acts of the ongoing persecution; how Barnabas, Paul, John and the others continue to travel, to preach and share the good news, I find myself wondering: how did they do it?

The good news of Jesus - that was their center, their core - that kept them rooted and connected, able to shake the dust off their feet and move on when needed.

They knew what kept them going.

They lived in a way of unfolding: Unfolding their lives into the message of Christ's unending love.

How about for us?

What's at the center of your faith? What draws you to seek Christ?

What's at the core of our life here at UMC?

In our congregational meeting today, Doug Miller is going to present a model of storytelling as a way of naming our core beliefs, and how we live into them - how we might find our lives unfolding into the gospel, our whole lives.

What is our center, my friends, and how do we live into it?