

The New Rules?

For the next two weeks, as I continue to follow the lectionary provided in Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals, I'm going to be drawing my sermons from The Acts of the Apostles, as I've done for the last two times I've been in the pulpit. There's going to be a bit of a twist, though, as I also incorporate thoughts about two heroes of the faith as suggested in that book. Not every daily reading in the book is given extensive connection with such heroes, but the readings for July 4th and 11th are and that provides me with the opportunity to extend my education, and yours, into the lives of such people. Today's exemplar is Martin of Tours, who is pictured on your bulletin. Frankly, it took me awhile to figure out the connection between Martin and this reading in Acts. As I've previously mentioned, the authors of Common Prayer do not feel bound by traditional feast days when listing these saints, so there has to be a reason for them to be associated with the passages for the day. When I came up with a solution, I had to discard it as I deepened my study of the Acts passage. But I think I do have a good answer now and it has nothing to do with his sharing his cloak with the poor man, although that certainly connects with our Psalm this morning.

The Church (capital C) has been primarily gentile for so long that we tend to forget the reality reflected in our story in Acts this morning: that is, the Gospel of Jesus came first to the Chosen People, the Jews, and its extension beyond Galilee and Judea, first to Samaria, then to men and women of all nations, was extremely controversial. A few years ago, Charlie and Pam Scalise used the commentary, Reading Acts, by Charles Talbert as the basis for our study in Sunday School of The Acts of the Apostles and I'm greatly indebted to them for introducing us to that book, from which I will draw this morning. One of the things that Talbert points out about this story is that it is not the only time in which an apostle has a positive experience with non-Jews, the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit, and that on each of those occasions, the apostle then seeks the retroactive blessings of the leaders of the Jerusalem church for his actions.

Why should this be so? Why was it such a struggle for those early Christians, good Jews, one and all, to come to terms with the idea that God would bless those outside the Law of Moses with grace and redemption? Talbert points out that there were two basic understandings among Jews about relations with Gentiles. Generally speaking, you were either of the party that held that Gentiles were outside of God's will and that relations with them should be strictly limited, or you were of the opinion that Gentiles could be accepted into Jewish life, but only after they became proselytes, that is, converts or "God-fearers."

For some faithful Jews, as you may remember from my sermons on Ezra last fall or from our study of the Deuterocanonical books in "Soup, Salad, and Soul" a few years ago, the concept of Jews and Gentiles living together would have been a big "no way." For them, that scenario was a disaster about to happen, not unlike the way the Ghostbusters described the coming disaster to "the Mayor" in the 1984 movie: "...a disaster of biblical proportions. ...real wrath of God type stuff... Fire and brimstone coming down from the skies! Rivers and seas boiling! ...Forty years of darkness! Earthquakes, volcanoes... Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together... mass hysteria!" But for other, equally faithful Jews, the whole promise of God was to be extended, in God's time, to the Gentiles. The children of Abraham were to be "light to the world." We find this approach especially in Isaiah, whom we know Jesus often quoted.

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This diversion of opinion extended into the early Church. As you just heard, “certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” This was despite the success of Philip’s preaching in Samaria, as recorded in Acts 8 (remember that the Jews thought the Samaritans had a corrupted version of “the custom of Moses”) and his subsequent conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. It was also despite the experience of Peter with the centurion Cornelius and his household, in Acts 10, of which Peter reminds the apostles and elders in verses 7 through 11 of our passage. Peter puts the question to those advocating for the Gentiles to become Jewish converts before they can claim salvation: “Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Ultimately, what we remember as “the Jerusalem Council” concurs with Peter and with James, Jesus’ brother, who is by now the recognized leader of the church in Jerusalem. But this does not stop those insisting that the Gentiles obey all the Law of Moses. They turn up again in chapter 21 of Acts to bring charges against Paul to James following Paul’s successful missionary journeys in Greece and Asia Minor. Paul also complains about and warns against these “Judaizers” in his letters to the Romans, the Philippians, the Corinthians, and to Titus. In fact, Paul’s letter to the Galatians is mostly about the problem of the Judaizers. He even, in that letter, complains that Peter himself has given in to them. Still, today, one will occasionally find a Christian who believes that only a full adherence to the Law of Moses, including dietary restrictions and Saturday sabbath observance, will lead to eternal life.

Given that this truly is an ongoing issue, we would do well, to borrow a phrase from James the Just, as Jesus’ brother was known, to understand his ruling nearly two thousand years ago. Did he release Gentile Christians like us from all of Moses’ Law except certain codicils? Or was he actually teaching something a little more subtle. Here’s where I am particularly grateful for the scholarship of Charles Talbert and others. James’ advice to the Gentile disciples is not about their salvation, Talbert points out. On that score, James is in agreement with Peter’s statement that salvation comes from the grace of the Lord Jesus. James says, “Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.” In other words, those Gentiles have found salvation already through the grace of God. James continues, “Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.” In the letter written “to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia,” the apostles and elders of the mother church repudiate those insisting on the Law. Instead, they write, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” Please note: not, “you will be saved,” but “you will do well.”

If these abstentions are not about salvation, what is James getting at? Talbert points to Leviticus, chapters 17 & 18, which offer “guidelines for sojourners.” The Leviticus passage is not about converting Gentiles to the path of Judaism but about advising them on how the Gentiles may live

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in peace if they come to live in the lands of the Twelve Tribes. James' recommendations, which are drawn on these Levitical instructions, are advice for those Gentile believers in Jesus on how to live in such a way that their Jewish brothers and sisters will find it possible to enjoy table fellowship with them.

The importance of this for the first century church cannot be overstated. In a few minutes, we will commemorate the Lord's Supper with our traditional bit of cracker (gluten-free, by the way) and grape juice. But in the early church, each Sunday worship gathering ended with a full and celebratory meal. In order for the Jewish disciples of Jesus, still observing the Mosaic Law, to be able to sit with the Gentile disciples and not feel as if they had polluted themselves, the Gentiles needed to abide by these guidelines James is pulling from Leviticus. James the Just is saying to the Gentiles, "do this for the sake of your Jewish family." He is saying to the Jewish disciples, "Torah teaches that if the Gentiles do these things, that is sufficient for ritual purity."

Sadly, we know from history and from Paul's letters that James' wise ruling did not contain the controversy. Along the way, those Jews who were not convinced that Jesus was the Messiah expelled from synagogue fellowship those who were. The nasty recriminations on both sides have left us with a shameful history of Christian anti-Semitism and deep wounds between two groups of adherents to the Abrahamic religions. And, over the centuries, those early controversies between Jewish and Gentile Christians have been replaced by arguments equally as fierce and, ultimately, equally as hollow. From divisions over the meaning of the Trinity and the nature of Christ, to the authority of Rome (at least twice), to the place of tradition, the "right" way to baptize, the "right" way to take communion, to whether to sing anything but Psalms, to whether or not to have musical instruments, to whether all races could worship together, to the place of women and LGBTQ people in the church, even, at one church Connie and I attended after the controversy, whether or not there should be curtains on the Sanctuary windows, Christians have found reason after reason to fight, to split, and to declare each other anathema.

It is here where Martin of Tours comes in. While he is best remembered for sharing his cloak with the poor man, as he does in El Greco's picture on the front of your bulletin, and for his declaration, "I am a soldier of Christ; it is not lawful for me to fight," I think it's important in light of Acts 15 to remember him for something he did as Bishop of Tours. In Martin's diocese and in many other places in France and Spain, there were followers of a Bishop of Avila, named Priscillian, whose ascetic and gnostic-leaning style of Christianity had been declared heretical. Martin was no Priscillianist. But he objected strongly to the Pope and to the emperor against the execution of Priscillian, the first Christian to be executed by other Christians for heresy. And he refused to use violence against the Priscillianists in his own diocese and objected to the use of violence to suppress them elsewhere. In this, he proved himself a worthy spiritual heir to James the Just, who recognized that if people were drawn to the Way of Jesus, human-made rules fell far second to the grace of God.

Jesus taught that the most important commandment was to love God with all of one's heart and soul and mind and strength. We might say that it is to worship God with integrity, not to leave any portion of our lives untouched by God. A case can be made that all of the stories we've studied in Acts in the last few weeks come down to having integrity with God and with our sisters and brothers. Barnabas showed financial and personal integrity in his relationship to the

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church; Ananias did not. The imprisoned and miraculously released Peter showed integrity in his following of Jesus; his antagonist, Herod Agrippa failed to show integrity to his worship of God as he allowed the people to worship him instead. James the Just showed his integrity to his brother's message as he welcomed the Gentiles to the fold. Martin showed his integrity to the loving message of Christ as he refused to persecute other believers who understood the faith differently from himself.

In his commentary on Acts, J. Bradley Chance writes, "The decree of James, applied to our contemporary situation, dares to call upon the people to define themselves by patterns of worship and living that challenge fundamental assumptions and values of our own version of pagan culture. We would likely enjoy our Christianity much more if, when applying this decree, we focused on a few sexual sins... and relegated the rest of the decree to antiquated irrelevance. Surely, being a part of God's people does not really ask us to rethink the fundamental values of our culture, does it?" Chance also writes, "The task for us is to challenge (ourselves) today to identify patterns of living, and perhaps even worship, that, despite cultural acceptance, are inconsistent with those who have been called out to be God's people."

What fundamental values of our culture should we be rethinking, Good Shepherd? Which of our patterns of living and of worship are built on cultural norms and not on the call of God? These are hard questions, but I believe that we, as a congregation, are up to wrestling with them. That is why we have embarked on an ongoing course of study on how we can build our church into a truly anti-racist gathering of individuals committed to anti-racism. We do not seek tolerance but full acceptance and love. Anything else falls short. And we need to begin to ask ourselves, as we continue that good work, what comes next? How do we continue our decades-long work in Creation Care? How do we promote work to address the scourge of homelessness in our community, the work to which our dear sister Jean Kim gave so much of her life? How do we call out and work against the causes of poverty to which we may contribute? How do we continue to show that this table, to which we will come in just a moment, is truly open to all who would come and join their hearts with Jesus?

When I began the journey of researching and writing this sermon, I gave it the title, "The New Rules," thinking that I would focus on the teaching of James as rules to govern the young church in place of the Law of Moses. But I realized over that journey that James wasn't proposing new rules at all. In reality, there are only two, both called out by James' brother Jesus from the myriad rules of Torah: Love God with integrity and love your neighbor in the same way. And so, I and we come to the table this morning with joy, celebrating the love that makes us one. Let us sing and pray and come together as Jesus taught us. Thanks be to God, Amen.