



## Sermon & Prayers, May 18

### Acts 15:1-18

These past few weeks, as we celebrate the season of Easter, we've heard scriptures describing what we call the early church. In the wake of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, the disciples and apostles have been *busy*. They have also been, for the most part, pretty successful. They are living out Jesus' commandments as best they can, they are forming intentional communities that care for the marginalized, they are proclaiming the good news and baptizing huge swaths of people seemingly every time they go to a new city. Their numbers are increasing quickly—the church is growing at a steady pace. And last week, we heard about baptisms happening, even among those who might be thought of as unlikely participants in the early church. For all intents and purposes, the early church is doing great. They are often communities we might highlight in our churches today, wanting to get back to a time of focused and intentional support and relationship building.

But lest we think *too* highly of the early church communities, we get to Acts 15. And quickly, we see that, even among the early church, there is arguing afoot. To be clear, this is not their first disagreement. They have been trying to make decisions about many different topics, including how to baptize people and what to eat. Today, their discussion topic of choice just happens to be circumcision.

And really, while the participants try to pretend like they are really concerned about salvation and correct conversion practices, they are really falling into the same traps I see our communities across the board falling into today. Really, they want to know who is “in” and who is “out” and they only want people included who are exactly like them. The same thing happens in our communities when we put up barriers, when we add rules, when we do not allow people to live as their authentic selves in the way God created them to be. We heard last week, when the Ethiopian eunuch asked, “What is to prevent me from being baptized,” that the question is not just about the practical, the location of water, but about whether they could be fully accepted in the community. This week, we see the flip side of that question, as we hear a discussion that debates whether all people can fully experience God's grace.

And for those of us who have found ourselves on the outside of communities, who have had our personhood questioned or our faithfulness doubted, who have heard conversations about whether or not we might be allowed in church, or to fully participate in worship, this text might hit a little too close to home. For too long and too often, Christian communities have been exclusive and judgmental spaces. Our text from Acts today is critical of allowing that pattern to continue.

Peter, Barnabas, and Paul are clear. God has been speaking through all people—God has erased all distinctions between “them” and “us”. *Any time* we attempt to redraw those boundaries, we are inventing human rules—we are building walls that God condemns. The differences we are quick to point out, the hoops we make people jump through—we hear in Acts that none of that matters. As Peter says, we all get saved by the same grace. And thanks be to God for that.

I do think it is important to be clear, however, that this doesn't mean we ignore our differences, but rather celebrate them—recognizing that the image of God is found across creation, not despite our differences but because of them. Here in Acts, we remember that all are made in the image of God—without exception, and without needing to fit ourselves into a box. We limit the image of God when, like those in our scripture arguing for

circumcision, we tell people that they need to change and assimilate to fit in or be a “good Christian”. We box up God every time we assume that God only loves the people we love, or that people need to alter who they are to be accepted. The image of God is present every time someone is authentically themselves—in every culture, every background, every expression of gender and every sexual orientation. These are not sins or things we need to repent from—they are ways God is made manifest in our world.

This is a text that, in many ways, might challenge us. It asks us to reconsider our welcome and hospitality. Are we *really* open to everyone, or are we just open to the people who are just like us? But in the ways that it challenges us, it also reminds us of God’s abounding grace in our lives. We don’t have to worry that we are getting it all right. We don’t have to shove ourselves into boxes, nor do we have to ignore parts of who God made us to be. Instead, we put our faith in Jesus Christ, knowing there is grace upon grace, not just for us, but for everyone and knowing that God works through all people, of all backgrounds and life experiences. Because of Jesus, we are free from our divisions and the “us vs. them” dichotomies we create. We are free to be reflections of the image of God in our world and celebrate the ways God shows up in the world, even in people we might think of as different from ourselves. Amen.

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