

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
January 21, 2024  
Acts 15:1-11  
*We Make Room: A Litmus Test or a Paradigm Shift?*

A reading from the book of Acts, chapter 15; Dialogue based on *The Message* version

Lisa: It wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: "If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved."

Rebecca: Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.

Lisa: After they were sent off and on their way, they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the non-Jewish outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!

Rebecca: When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders.

Lisa: Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. "You have to circumcise the pagan converts," they said. "You must make them keep the Law of Moses."

Rebecca: The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor:

Lisa: "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him. "So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?" **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

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“They are us.” This was the take home message from Rahma Mussa, an 11th grader from Lansing Eastern High School in her winning submission to the Dr. Martin Luther King Commission of Mid-Michigan essay contest. I heard Ms. Mussa share her essay at the annual Dr. Martin Luther King luncheon and program last Monday. She spoke about the response in New Zealand to the Christchurch mosque shootings. In 2019 there were consecutive mass shootings at two mosques killing 51 people. Ms. Mussa shared that the response of the government and the people of New Zealand was compassion. She said that the “phrase “They Are Us” became a mantra, capturing the basic knowledge that the Muslim victims were not outsiders, but important, cherished people of the New Zealand family.” The Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, emphasized eradicating extremism and hate speech and this “reinforced a commitment to safeguarding the nation’s values of tolerance and acceptance.”<sup>1</sup>

I was quite taken by Rahma Mussa’s essay, as I was with all of the essays, and one poem, from area students who wrote as part of this competition. “They are us.” This is also the take home message from our scripture this morning. “They are us.”

Acts chapter 15 is a crucial pivot point in the formation of the early church. The book of Acts opens with Jesus telling the disciples not to leave Jerusalem after he ascends to heaven and to wait there to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. The disciples do just that, and on Pentecost, celebrated 50 days following the first day of the Passover, the Holy Spirit descends and the church is birthed. Peter then preaches about the person of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. And as we hear in Acts 2: 41-42, “So those who welcomed Peter’s message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

We celebrate this story from Acts 2 every year on Pentecost – this year on May 19 – as we joyously recognize the power of the Holy Spirit to gather us as a community. After Jesus had told the disciples to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, he also told them (Acts 1:8) “... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” To the ends of the earth... this means that if the disciples follow their instructions from Jesus, that the family of faith is going to grow and it is going to grow with people from different traditions and customs than the initial followers who were from a Jewish lineage.

And we hear the disciples do just that. After preaching and growing the community in Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean countryside, we hear in Acts Chapter 8 that Philip proclaimed the word in Samaria. Peter and John joined him and many in the villages of Samaria were baptized. The remainder of the book of Acts tells about the spread of the Gospel “to ends of the earth,” beginning journeys into Syria, north Africa, the Mediterranean region, and farther into Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> You can read the essays of the award winners on *Lansing State Journal* website. <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/opinion/contributors/viewpoints/2024/01/16/martin-luther-king-jr-essay-contest-in-lansing-names-winners/72240535007/?>

In addition to the disciples who had known and traveled with Jesus, and who were now promoted to apostles – literally those who are sent out - the apostle Paul joins in. Paul becomes the main conveyer of the good news of Jesus Christ in these communities. Paul's story deserves more than what I will share this morning, but suffice it to say that Paul was a man deeply committed to his Jewish faith. Known initially as Saul, he persecuted the early followers of Jesus. In Paul's eyes, and in the eyes of other religious leaders, the "People of the Way," as the followers of Jesus were known, were failing to adhere to the laws set down by Moses. Paul had a dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus and the rest, as they say, is history, as Paul travelled widely growing the community of believers. We will hear stories about Paul's trips in the next two weeks.

So we have Peter and Paul, with various traveling companions, visiting towns, preaching and baptizing and growing the faith community. On their circuit rides, they had a similar strategy. They would begin in the local synagogue preaching to the Jewish community, and then if their message was not received well, they would venture out into the non-Jewish community. This non-Jewish community was diverse – some in this community appreciated the spiritual practices of Judaism, but had not become converts. Some worshipped local gods– Roman, Greek, or maybe spirits of nature. Some worshipped no god at all. The Holy Spirit moved through these communities and found people receptive to the good news of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Acts chapter 14 ends with these words (from The Message version of scripture): "Paul and Barnabas handpicked leaders in each church. After praying, they presented these new leaders to the Master to whom they had entrusted their lives. Working their way back through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia and preached in Perga. Finally, they made it to Attalia and caught a ship back to Antioch, where it had all started—launched by God's grace and now safely home by God's grace. A good piece of work. On arrival, they got the church together and reported on their trip, telling in detail how God had used them to throw the door of faith wide open so people of all nations could come streaming in. Then they settled down for a long, leisurely visit with the disciples.

God had used Paul and Barnabus to throw the door of faith wide open so people of all nations could come streaming in. Sounds like rainbows and unicorns all around. Except it wasn't. As we heard in our scripture dialogue this morning: It wasn't long before some Jewish leaders showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: "If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved."

Whoa! Stop the presses. As we heard: Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest to this litmus test for the community of believers. And rather than one leader making a decision, in what would become a model for the church moving forward, they called a meeting!

Paul, Barnabas, and a few others went down to Jerusalem and met up with the other apostles and leaders in Jerusalem. My favorite part of the passage is the lobbying they did along the way: “they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the non-Jewish outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!” It was terrific news... and yet I imagine they were a little unsure of how the news was going to be received by the leaders in Jerusalem.

And they were right to be a bit concerned. After they made their joy-filled presentation, some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. And they reiterated that new converts had to keep the law of Moses – they had to be circumcised. The apostles and leaders argued back and forth, the discussion getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor and declared that there would be no litmus test for new converts. Peter had changed his mind about this topic.

You see Peter struggled in those early days to understand how a community could be formed from those from such different traditions. How could he, one who observed the Jewish religious traditions like circumcision and the dietary laws laid down by Moses – how could he make disciples of those who did not follow the same path unless **they changed.** For Peter these non-Jewish believers must adopt the ways and traditions of the initial followers of Jesus. They must be circumcised and they must follow the dietary laws. And then something happened and Peter’s mind was changed. He had a vision that helped him understand that the dietary laws that the Jewish people had followed since the days of Moses did not have to be applied so stringently any more.

This vision prompts Peter to preach at the house of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, stationed in the town of Caesarea. While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” <sup>2</sup>

Peter had a change of heart! And this change of heart led him to speak up and speak out at this church meeting. He reminded those gathered that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of the good news and embrace it—and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And in words that I am sure many in the church wish they had the courage to say more often, Peter says, “So why are you now trying to out-god God.” Peter questions why they are trying to load these new believers down with rules that crushed their ancestors and crushed them too. And then in words I believe we need to hear more often, Peter says, “Don’t we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?” Can I get amen?

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<sup>2</sup> This story can be found in Acts chapters 10 and 11.

Peter, the rock on which the church was founded, said we make room for all and there is no litmus test for being part of the flock. Jesus saving grace was freely given to all. They are us. We are them. We humans do not get to control where the winds of the Holy Spirit blow. And at the end of the day, I think that is where our discomfort lies – or I should say my discomfort lies. Trying to out-god God. Trying to be the one in control, rather than the Holy Spirit. This is a lesson the church has to learn over and over again.

In 1962, just two years before PCO was birthed as a congregation, the American physicist, historian and philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I read this book in a first-year seminar in my graduate program in neuroscience. My Ph.D. advisor felt it was essential reading for all incoming students. The book blew me away, and became a bible of sorts to me in my research career. Kuhn helped me understand that science doesn't always follow a linear trajectory, with one piece of data and then another piece and then another piece adding to the puzzle until the whole emerges; "the addition of new truths to the stock of old truths."<sup>3</sup> Sometimes that does happen and there are incremental advances. But sometimes as data emerge, the pieces actually don't fit into the puzzle at all. The current puzzle must be disbanded. Kuhn coined the term "paradigm shift" for this phenomenon. Kuhn believed that these paradigm shifts "open up new approaches to understanding what scientists would never have considered valid before."<sup>4</sup> There is more to Kuhn's argument about paradigm shifts – sermons for other days. However, for this morning what struck me as I spent time with our morning's scripture from the book of Acts is that Peter beat Thomas Kuhn to the punch by nearly 2000 years.

Christianity may have started out with a linear trajectory – the disciples and the crowds, and then those in Jerusalem on Pentecost and then in the rest of Judea and then Samaria, all (or almost all) from Jewish backgrounds, following the same rules and customs. But there came a tipping point when the data no longer fit and a choice had to be made. A paradigm shift. We will give up control. We will not make them conform to our practices and customs. We will not out-god God. There is no litmus test.

The question for us today at this church on a cold January morning in 2024 is whether we can apply the lessons of the early church to our world today. What would it look like for us to let go of the control of whose presence is welcome, included and valued? Who are those who we don't think are worthy or deserving or have followed the rules enough to have a seat at the table? Who are those we don't think have the right pedigree or skin color or sexual orientation or political views or status or lifestyle for their voice to be heard.

If this is a struggle for you, you are in good company. If you aspire to this, and aren't sure the next steps or even where to start, you are in good company. If you have been doing this work

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<sup>3</sup> Bird, Alexander, "Thomas Kuhn", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-kuhn/>

<sup>4</sup> This quote and more information on Kuhn can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Kuhn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Kuhn) and <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/aug/19/thomas-kuhn-structure-scientific-revolutions>;

for a while and would like more partners on this journey, you are in good company. We have two Adult Ed sessions coming up that offer opportunities for curiosity, learning, and conversation. Next Sunday January 28, join us for Meeting Your Neighbor Part 1: What does it mean to be an ally, advocate, or activist countering anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. And then on February 18 join us for Meeting Your Neighbor Part 2: Gender and Sexuality 101: defining sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and gender expression.

On Christmas Eve, I challenged us to make room, even in our weariness. Now I am challenging us to model the early church in how we make room. No litmus test is required. They are us. Join me in prayer.