

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – August 19, 2018

Acts 15

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

[Note: This text is NOT one of the given readings for this particular week in the Revised Common Lectionary. In fact, it does not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary at all! (Though it is read during the Easter season in the Roman Catholic liturgy). It was selected thematically to accompany the sharing of our Annual Conference Delegates this week. So while there are not readily available collections of additional resources to which we can link, there are two relevant commentaries on portions of the Acts 15 reading provided below.]

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Acts 15:1-17

(by Frank L. Crouch for *workingpreacher.org* – April 28, 2013)

Our look at this passage will focus on three questions:

1. What is the New Testament’s basic understanding of God’s purpose in relationship with the world?
2. How do we find a clear path to right action when scripture makes competing proclamations?
3. How often, with good intentions, do we place barriers in the path of those who seek God?

What is the New Testament's basic understanding of God’s purpose in relationship with the world?

On the one hand, there is not a simple answer to this or any question about God. We can point to thousands of sermons and commentaries to prove it. If the answers were easily known, we would not find so many different opinions -- or so we say. On the other hand, *this* question about God might actually have an obvious answer.

At the end of this passage, James cites the prophets, “I will rebuild the dwelling of David ... so that all other peoples may seek the Lord” (verses 13-17). Laying aside our intricate analyses of the role of Israel, of the Law, of faith versus works, of the church, the Holy Spirit, or the Christ in bringing (or not bringing) people to God, let us consider the possibility that God fundamentally desires that every possible door be opened so that every possible person in every possible circumstance might find the life that God offers.

Such an understanding is present throughout the New Testament (and the Old Testament): Jesus calls to himself “all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens” (Matt 11:28). He says in John, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). Paul says in Romans, “For from [God] and through [God] and to [God] are all things” (11:36). First Timothy states, “God our Savior ... desires that everyone be saved” (2:3-4).

I recognize that this “obvious” answer can’t ignore the complications posed by scriptural passages about predestination or passages describing people who will not be saved (e.g., Romans 8:29-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12; Mark 4:11-12; Revelation 13:7-8). Thus, a second question:

How do we find a clear path to right action when scripture makes competing proclamations?

Disclaimer: I speak from a tradition that seeks sound doctrine but declines to construct a systematic theology, being relatively unperturbed by scripture’s loose ends and less dismayed by doctrinal inconsistencies than inconsistencies between our actions and the essentials of the gospel. Thus the question is posed in terms of right action, not right doctrine.

This seems consistent with the debate in this narrative. Some say that believing males must be circumcised (15:1, 5). Others say they do not (15: 7-11, 14-15). Ultimately, doctrines that matter find expression in actions -- for example, who we ordain, how we serve communion, and how and when we baptize. Changing the actions that matter necessarily involves changing the doctrines behind them, the interpretations of scripture supporting them, and which passages we hold most dear.

We see that at work in this passage. Looking from a distance of 2,000 years, we should not underestimate how wrenching this conflict would have been for the people involved and how difficult it would have been for them to predict who history would eventually label as the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” Circumcision advocates had scripture on their side, and by some accounts—according to some appeals to scripture today -- maybe they should have won.

Genesis 17 demonstrates the extent to which circumcision advocates literally and unequivocally appealed to core scriptures about the relationship between God and God’s people. The dynamics of that scriptural debate become clearer when we note that James’ citation of the prophets offers a paraphrase of the combination of three prophetic texts (Amos 9:9-12; Jeremiah 12:15; and Isaiah 45:21-24).

In this case the literal words of one passage were trumped by the subtext of other passages -- God’s desire to save all people -- and by God’s own action. The requirement of circumcision was supplanted by the Holy Spirit’s work in the lives of people who had long been considered excluded. Peter describes how “God ... testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit ... [and] has made no distinction between them and us” (15:8-9).

James offers the above-mentioned scriptural texts, newly considered foundational, in support of Peter’s actions (15:13-17). God’s actions through the Spirit engender new practices among God’s people, requiring new understanding, new doctrine, and the ascension of newly significant passages in place of what had long served as established guides. That brings us to the final question.

How often, with good intentions, do we place barriers in the path of those who seek God?

Not everyone would agree that God most desires that every person find fullness of life in God. But, perhaps, people might agree with this: regardless of faith tradition, it is easy for us to assume that our ways of bringing people to God are consistent with how God wants us to bring people to God. Like the circumcision advocates in Acts, we believe this to be true. Yet God seems unconstrained by our certainties and sends the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, sometimes working hard to convince us that our actions hinder rather than help people find their way.

Acts makes that point more than once, not only in this passage. Earlier, when the Sanhedrin wanted to execute Peter and the apostles, Gamaliel advised them to consider their actions carefully, lest they find themselves fighting against God (Acts 5:34-40). Paul gives a similar admonition in Antioch” “Beware, therefore, that what

the prophets said does not happen to you: ‘Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you’” (Acts 13:40-41). The admonition holds not only for Antioch, but also for all who claim to be people of God.

Commentary on Acts 15:1-18

(by Mary Hinkle Shore for *workingpreacher.org* – May 14, 2017)

In *Bird by Bird: Some Thoughts on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott recalls that, “E. L. Doctorow once said that ‘writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.’”¹

As Jesus departed from the apostles in Acts 1, he told them that they would be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8).

The word of God spreads, certainly, yet the road to the ends of the earth is not illuminated all at once. With only the available light, the apostles must make decisions about the direction of the church’s witness. The story of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 narrates how the light of the apostles’ experiences and their reading of Scripture combine in such a way that they recognize God’s mercy extending to Gentiles.

The Scene

Acts 14 closes with Paul and Barnabas among the believers in Antioch. God had opened “A door of faith for the Gentiles,” and Paul and Barnabas share this news with the church in Antioch. All is well.

Acts 15 opens with the news that “certain individuals” from Judea arrived in Antioch. These teachers say that Gentile members of the church must be circumcised (and presumably also observe the rest of the Law) in order to be saved. The question facing the church is if the saving work of Christ is effective for those who are not Jews and who never become law-observant? Jesus himself was a Jew and the earliest Christian communities were steeped in Jewish scripture and tradition. Could Jesus be the Jewish Messiah and yet bring salvation apart from the Law?

The question inspired “no small dissension and debate” (15:2) in Antioch. When no consensus emerged, the church sent Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others to consult with the church leaders in Jerusalem.

Acts 15 includes insights both into the church’s process of deciding a contentious issue and into the substance of the decision reached. First, to the question of process. A few practices worthy of imitation are in evidence.

How the Church Decides

The conversation is broadened. The church is local and it is more than just local. A church-sized group of Christians is able to decide some things, but sometimes, more voices need to be brought into the conversation. The dispute arises in Antioch, and when the dissension escalates, the church at Antioch sends its leaders and “some of the others” to Jerusalem. (Are these “others” the teachers who oppose Paul and Barnabas, or rank-and-

file members of the church in Antioch -- or representatives of both groups? The answer is not clear from the text.)

Standard divisions are examined. Sometimes a way forward comes through the realization that long-standing differences are not necessarily defining differences. “We” thought we were different from “them,” but as we get to know each other, we find points of similarity and contact. In his speech, Peter works to overcome the “us” (Jews) and “them” (others/Gentiles) distinction. God has given Gentiles the Holy Spirit and faith (15:8-9), just as God gave these gifts to those Jews who are numbered among believers in Jesus. Moreover, the Jews who believe in Jesus believe that they will be saved, not by keeping the Law, but by “the grace of the Lord Jesus.” In these ways, there are no distinctions between Jewish and Gentile believers.

The testimony of experience counts. After Peter’s speech, Barnabas and Paul give an account of signs and wonders that have happened in their ministry. These testimonies of the Holy Spirit’s actions beyond the Jewish community bear witness to God at work within and among the uncircumcised.

Experience is confirmed by the testimony of Scripture. When it is James’ turn to speak, he affirms what Simon Peter (oddly called, “Simeon,” in verse 14) has said, and then cites the prophet Amos in agreement with what has been said by Peter, Barnabas and Paul. When God called Abraham, God chose a people for God’s self from among the Gentiles. Again, in the midst of a Jerusalem reduced to rubble, God promised to rebuild the ruins and in so doing, reached out to Abraham’s offspring and the Gentiles as well.

What the Church Decides

On the basis of a conversation in which both human experience and the witness of Scripture are shared, those in Jerusalem conclude that the Gentiles do not need to observe circumcision in order to be numbered among the people of God. Those sitting around the table realize that they have been the beneficiaries of the wideness of God’s mercy, and they recognize God at work in the extending of mercy also to Gentiles.

For what it’s worth, the argument is not that God is doing a new thing but rather that God is doing what God has always done: showing mercy, and creating a people for God’s self where no people existed before. From the start of the Christian church, it seems to have been important for leaders to see themselves as staying within received traditions -- even when the substance of their decisions had the effect of opening new doors for ministry.

Sources of Light

On the way to the ends of the earth, a church that can see only as far as the headlights has these sources of light:

Scripture. Scripture allows us to describe the character of God and so to recognize God at work in the world beyond Scripture. When we are trying to discern a call from God, it helps to investigate how what God might be doing in our lives or in the life of our congregation can be shown in Scripture as the character of God.

Experience. As important as the witness of Scripture is, in Acts it is everywhere supplemented by experience. Experience and Scripture interpret each other. The experience of God’s Spirit at work in unexpected ways (for example, in the life of the Ethiopian eunuch, or the lives of Cornelius and his household) changes the long-term direction of the church.

A Long Conversation. Acts 15 tells the story of a conversation that undoubtedly took time -- perhaps decades -- to unfold. While Luke compresses that story, he does not entirely paper over difficulties that the earliest Christians faced as they tried to remain faithful to the Spirit's leading all the way to the ends of the earth. Early believers taught various (sometimes contradictory) things, and they argued with each other. When they achieved a consensus, it was only after a process that took time and required input from multiple voices. By means of scripture, experience, and a long conversation about them both, God offers the light needed for the church's whole trip.

Notes:

1. Anne Lamont, *Bird by bird: some instructions on writing and life*, (New York City: Anchor Books, 1995), 18

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading this passage?