

Sermon Transcript

A Taste of Grace

**Luke 24:48-49 and Acts 15:1-14, 19-21 | Tenth Sunday After Pentecost | July 28, 2024 |
John Klawiter, preaching**

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

Do you wonder what the first church council meeting was REALLY like?

Imagine the tension.

What was it like when someone from the sect of the Pharisees said, “no, they HAVE to keep the law of Moses?”

Did someone gasp? Was there a lot of bickering? What would those arguments have been like?

This is kind of a big deal.

It might help if I give a recap how this council came to be.

Paul and Barnabas have gone on their first missionary journey and are teaching everyone about Jesus. It’s going really well and people are joining the movement. They’re even called Christians now!

Paul is not one of the insiders, or the original disciples, but because of his unique conversion experience of Jesus appearing to him along the road to Damascus, he’s a natural fit to spread the word across the Mediterranean.

He’s just returned to Jerusalem from modern day Turkey to tell the team back at the home office all about what God is up to on their trip.

Of course, some individuals from Judea have gone behind their back to try to turn away new believers, but the impact has been clear—people can’t get enough of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ!

But that brings us to the present moment.

The council of Jerusalem.

Why are the sect of Pharisees pushing back? WHAT are they pushing back on? And Why does it matter?

First of all, when you hear the term “Pharisees”, you might have an adverse reaction. When linked to Jesus, we naturally think of how Jesus is arrested and put on trial. It’s the Pharisees that are the most mentioned opposition group.

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But, after the resurrection, a group of Pharisees believed in Jesus. Some become Christians, but retain all the qualities of their Jewish upbringing.

Believing in the Messiah is an extension of faith—they haven't thrown out the past. Some of them, clearly, have power and a seat at the table about what is required of a new believer.

And up to this point, if you want to be a new believer in Jesus, you are essentially becoming Jewish, but believing that the Messiah has come.

It's a double conversion.

Not only are you becoming a believer in the living God, Jesus Christ... you are a law-abiding, Moses loving Jew.

It's a lot to expect from someone who doesn't already have that background.

As Luther Seminary professor Matt Skinner writes, "the narrative wants readers to know that this development was due to God's initiative and neither a marketing decision nor a severing of the church's identity as a movement initially incubated within Judaism."

"Acts never imagines a Gentile church coming to replace or erase its Jewish identity and origins. Consequential and controversial decisions take time and patience. Discernment is difficult because so much can be at stake."

This is a huge point. I don't think the Pharisees are being unreasonable by wondering what will happen if new converts don't obey the laws of Moses.

I can understand their deep desire to preserve the rich history as written in the Torah and what we know as the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament.

Imagine sitting there and hearing the excited Paul show up and tell his stories. Everyone is believing in Jesus!

But none of them are following the rituals to become Jewish. What will happen if we let ANYTHING go???

This has to feel scary. This has to be unsettling. Will their past disappear?

I am personally grappling with this with regards to the camp that we took our canoe trip through. I have a ton of ownership to Camp Vermilion.

This is the place where I went 3 times as a high school student.

It's where I worked for four summers. Where I met Taryn.

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I have seen the power of camping ministry in my own call to become a pastor. It's why I encourage kids who go on these canoe trips to consider becoming camp counselors or canoe guides someday.

This week I noticed how much things have changed.

When I was a guide in 2002, there were 9 full time guides taking out trips every week of the summer. By the last week of July, we'd already each taken out 4-5 trips.

The groups weren't all from Minnesota. I led groups from Illinois, Wisconsin, Colorado, Iowa.

This past week, our two groups had guides leading their first trips ever. I was surprised. I expected by now that they'd have a few trips, but because of how the camp schedule was running, there wasn't a need for a ton of guides. It surprised me—even after taking trips the last four years.

I want to see the camp grow and thrive. And it might continue to do so, but it feels like the days of having 9 full time guides are long past.

Yet, great things were happening. (**Three SLIDES**). From having smores around the campfire, swimming after a hard day of portaging, or playing a game of pinecone baseball. The kids on the trip had a phenomenal experience and all talked about how excited they are to return next summer.

I am filled with hope that the quality of the experience matters and that we, as the church, show our youth that experiential learning matters through investing in these opportunities.

One profound moment of grace happened on the last night when the girls group knew where our campsite was (**ARRIVING**). They hand-delivered burritos to us (**SLIDE**)—"Canoe-ber Eats" because they knew we didn't have any (**SLIDE of us eating**).

I get a bit nostalgic about the old days. I often hear that same type of story about the church. Things have changed and we all want to make sure we're holding on to part of that past.

But what are we holding on to? Is it possible that we are afraid of losing something that the Holy Spirit is already actively working on? I felt the voice of the Pharisee tug at me, but I reminded myself that it's ok. Everything isn't the same, but I witnessed incredible kindness, friendship, and faith-filled conversations throughout the week.

God's up to something with these kids.

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So... what was the resolution at that first council meeting in Jerusalem?

A compromise. (**IMAGE of Council**)

We don't know all the details. We don't know how long it took. But we do know that Jesus's brother, James, is the one who speaks up.

James declares that Gentiles—basically anyone who is non-Jewish—are full members of the church, just as they are.

But he wants some skin in the game (**list of rules**).

The rules are to avoid food associated with idols. Don't eat meat which has been strangled or has blood in it, and avoid immoral sexual behavior, which again, he doesn't elaborate on.

Then, they send a letter with Paul and Silas (**circle the letters**)—because Paul gets in a dispute with Barnabas, and they go in different directions. This letter gives authority for Paul to continue his ministry with the backing of the greater church.

Is this the final decision? Will there be future items to discuss? Of course.

If you've eaten a medium or rare steak, you might be wondering if you're still in good standing with God.

Yes, you are. Because the church continues to evolve.

What will the church be like for the next generation, as newly baptized Emerson grows up and leads in the future?

I don't have a crystal ball. I have no idea. But I know it will be different. The church is evolving faster than we might always be comfortable with.

Which is why we make decisions with time and patience. Discernment is critical.

Like Paul, James, the Pharisees, and the other members of the first church council meeting back in Jerusalem, they put Jesus first. They discerned a path forward that welcomed people into the ministry, not seeking to push them out.

Jesus is guiding our way. With the memories of the past come the opportunities of the future. We embrace what is to come because God is present in each moment. Amen.