

July 28, 2019
Acts 15:6-11
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Fight or Switch?”

Good morning! This is the final Sunday of our Drawn by the Spirit series which has had us in the book of Acts since the beginning of June. Adult Sunday School classes have been studying “Draw the Circle” by Mark Batterson. Assistant Board chair Larry Ford has written some excellent comments in this month’s Connection which I hope you have a chance to read.

I want to begin by telling you a story. It might not seem like a remarkable story, but I think it is less commonplace than we might think. I was probably also struck by this story because I think it is relevant to our text from Acts chapter 15. We’ll see if you agree with me.

I was with a group of women friends this week, many of whom live in downtown Goshen -- an older neighborhood with houses on fairly small city lots. One of my friends recounted something which happened in her neighborhood several years ago. Her neighbor Larry (not Larry Ford!) was a person with different political views than she had, but he was nice guy -- always kind to her children and polite to her. He liked to sit out on his front porch and smoke in the evenings, and so did some other neighbors, so they got to be friends with Larry, even though they didn’t agree some things. One day, Larry added something to the outside of his house: a Confederate flag. This did not go over well with Larry’s neighbors. Although they didn’t confront him, he must have gotten wind of it, because he walked over one evening and asked, “Does my Confederate flag offend you?” and he told them why he thought it was OK, and they told him that they didn’t see it that way, and why they found it offensive. And then they suggested that Larry ask the neighbor across the street -- who is African American -- if *she* found his display of the Confederate flag

offensive. So Larry went across the street and asked that neighbor, and she said Yes, it was offensive to her. So Larry took the flag down from the front of his house, because it offended his neighbors. End of story. No big deal, right?

Or maybe it's a bigger deal than we think. After all, Larry has freedom of speech under the 1st Amendment; it was his property and his flag and he's entitled to put up whatever he wants. I don't know what Larry's connection was to the Confederacy, but he's entitled to his opinion about that, too. There weren't any legal grounds for anybody to force him to take down his flag, but he decided to do it on his own. Not, apparently because he didn't like it or had changed his position about whatever that flag represented for him; he took it down when he realized that it offended his neighbors.

Let me remind you of the context of Acts -- the Council at Jerusalem in chapter 15, particularly -- and of many of the letters of Paul in the New Testament. The church begins in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. There is a brief honeymoon period at the end of chapter 2 when Christians are breaking bread and sharing what they have with glad and generous hearts and have the good will of all people. And then, conflict begins to break out. The record we have is what's in the New Testament itself -- Luke's description of the conflict in Acts, and Letters which Paul writes to churches in conflict in Corinth, Galatia and elsewhere. I appreciate that the church leaders who included this stuff in the biblical canon were willing to leave all that messiness in the record. We are so much richer than if we did not have the words of Paul to the Corinthians and we were simply led to believe that after Acts 2, all the Christians lived happily ever after. Because the Bible isn't a fairy tale: it's an account of real people with real struggles. Of course, the issues tearing at the early Church were not Confederate flags or immigration or foreign computer hacking. But the early Church was struggling with differences of race and religion and economic class, and with sexual misconduct and discrimination. In fact, the only time the Church has *not* struggled with these issues is when the Church has ignored them and acted like they don't exist.

So all the time the apostles Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas and others have been healing and sharing the good news of Jesus of Nazareth and converting people to Christianity by the thousands,

there has been an undercurrent of discontent. Not from Rome, who has not yet perceived Christianity as a threat to its power, or from the Jewish establishment which is openly and aggressively arresting Christ's followers; the undercurrent is coming from other Christians -- especially those who converted from Judaism. These are believers who were raised with Jewish law and have followed Jewish law in matters of diet and behavior, and especially -- at least for a significant percentage of them -- in the matter of circumcision. Circumcision was a mark, a physical sign of belonging to the chosen people. It was a sign of religion, but also of race and identity. Gentiles -- that is, any man who wasn't raised as a Jew -- were not circumcised.

Paul and Barnabas get back to Antioch after their two-year missionary swing through Cyprus and around the Mediterranean and report how the grace of God has opened faith for the Gentiles. And then folks start coming down from Judea -- Jewish territory -- and saying, "You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised." And Acts 15:2 says (and I quote) Paul and Barnabas had no small dissention and debate with them. In other words, there was a big fight and Paul and Barnabas head to Jerusalem for a show down with the Jewish Christians. The year is AD 48, 20-25 years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. What does and does not happen in that council meeting is what reminded me of Larry and his Confederate flag.

After a lot of debate at the council about whether to include people who are not just like us in the Christian movement, Peter stands up and makes a speech. Peter -- who had the dream about the sheet coming down from heaven, and realized that God was working through a Roman centurion Cornelius -- has had a significant change of heart about the Gentiles. Peter says if God sent the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, just like God did to the Jews, then there is no distinction between them in the eyes of God. Why are we putting God to the test when we believe we will be saved by the grace of Jesus, just as the Gentiles will be? And the entire assembly listens as Barnabas and Paul recount the signs and wonders God has been doing among the Gentiles.

We don't know if everyone present was in agreement -- probably not, church business being what it is. There is no record of any discipline or Jewish Christians who were still unhappy about the

Gentile mission. In fact, there are still some items of Jewish law -- both dietary and codes of behavior -- which are important enough that even Gentile believers should be expected to observe them. But it is James the brother of Jesus has the quote of the day in verse 19: he says, "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God."

Whatever your theological or political persuasion -- and I know that there are a variety of them represented here at Creekside -- I think James' statement is wise. Troubling other people with what we believe doesn't make us right. It doesn't make us wrong. It just means we offend our neighbors, or our family or Facebook friends or whatever. It may seem like a discussion about circumcision -- of all things -- is so ridiculous and archaic that it doesn't compare to any of the issues we are facing in our country or in our churches today. But I can say with conviction that the Gentile mission was every bit as important, and every bit as divisive to the early Church as any issue the church is struggling with today. And I believe the way forward is much the same. First of all, look for evidence of the Holy Spirit. Is the work of the Spirit evident in the lives of the people with whom we disagree or want to marginalize? If it is, we'd better be careful whom we condemn. Is the work of the Spirit evident in our lives? If not, we'd better be even more careful whom we condemn. Is there anything which we would be willing to set aside in order to have a better relationship with our neighbors? Or would we rather fight than switch? Where would all we non-Jewish believers be if Peter had hung on to his Jewish convictions instead of listening to the Holy Spirit?

Secondly, remember the grace of Jesus Christ. No one is beyond its reach, and none of us gets to decide who deserves to have it. That is because no one -- not us, not them, not the people who agree with us not the people who trouble us -- no one has earned the grace of Jesus. It can't be earned: that's why it's grace. The grace of Jesus may be a nice extra people who are always right -- I am better than you, *and* Jesus loves me -- but for those of us who miss the mark once in a while, that is a pretty big leveling factor -- if I am willing to confess that I'm a sinner, then the fact that you're wrong means we have a lot in common. As Christians, the need for and the power of the grace of Jesus should be something we all have in common. It

might even be more important than the things which divide us. How are the grace of Jesus and the work of the Spirit evident in our lives? What would our neighbors say? Amen.