

Gosh, there are so many juicy bits to this text:

- Last we heard, the Holy Spirit sent one of the disciple-apostles, Philip, to encounter a God-knowing, Ethiopian eunuch (remember these identifications are important), to teach them about the abundant, welcoming love that God showed the world in Jesus the Christ. Philip was a willing evangelist / accompanier of the eunuch from Ethiopia.
- Next, the Spirit of the risen Christ calls out to the chief persecutor of the Jesus-movement, named Saul, to repent and become an advocate for the Way of the Christ. In order for this to happen, a Jewish believer, named Ananias, had to take Saul into his home, and nurse him back to health after Saul was struck blind. Ananias really didn't like that idea, because Saul was a schmuck! It took three days (ya know, kind of like the resurrection) for Saul to regain his sight – in that time, Ananias gritted his teeth and cared for Saul, and with his kindness, Saul's heart was opened to receive the deep love that Jesus had been preaching and, well, lived; and Saul accepted the gift that Jesus was to the world. Once his heart was opened, then so, too, were his eyes. Saul became a new human being, changed his vocation, and accordingly his name, becoming Paul – who travelled the Mediterranean world teaching, with power, about Jesus the Christ.
- Paul was so filled with the Spirit that he went on to do his thing, and people were captivated by his message. However, that wasn't going to sit too well with the leaders of the nascent Church back in Jerusalem, so the Holy Spirit needed to do a little more work. So while Paul was out in the world doing his thing, the Spirit sent the disciple-apostle Peter to meet up with a Roman Centurion, Luke tells us in Acts chapter 10, “of the *Italian*

Cohort.” This dude, Cornelius, was a Roman of Romans...a gentile of gentiles...as non-Jewish as that world could offer!! And using the metaphor of food, God tells Peter to go and have a non-kosher meal with that guy and his household. (Of course the Spirit had also started working on Cornelius to accept Peter into his house.) So after a meaningful, symbol-ridden dream, and the Spirit leading Peter to Cornelius’ residence, Peter finally comprehends that “what God calls clean, (he) must not call profane.” Peter, the rock on whom Jesus founded the Church, is getting the message that the resurrection is opening the door to a whole lot more people than the Jewish folks ever imagined.

- This understanding by Peter, and Paul’s experience “out in the world of gentiles,” set the stage for the story AnneMarie read to us.
- More apostles are being tagged by the Spirit as gifted evangelists and are commissioned to spread the gospel. One of them, named Barnabus, has been partnered with Paul.
 - This is one more juicy tidbit I want to raise. Please notice that in all of these stories, the transformations are made because of people coming together. In all of these encounters, *everyone* is changed/affected as the Holy Spirit works through their relationships! The Christian journey is about partnering with others; it’s about being vulnerable and sharing your lives—the joys and the sorrows—with others, and allowing those relationships to inform your faith.

Today's reading is an interesting case in point. "Circumcision" – is it a mandatory part of the conversion process? Well, let's name the obvious thing, this is a male conversation.

The old schoolers, those who have been based solely in Jerusalem, believe that if anyone is to become Christian, they must first become Jewish in order to take on the teachings of Jesus. Those who have been out in the world, namely Paul and Silas, have seen how the Spirit has caught fire in the hearts and minds of men without their being circumcised, and strongly understand that the Spirit couldn't care less about a physical change signifying a change of the heart. So, to them, the argument about circumcision is old, outmoded and, frankly, a waste of breath. But this is one of those thresholds the growing church needs to pass over.

So, a Council is called to take up the discussion. Pat Baker, through a series of texts with me, pointed out that the conversation was healthy and that people were willing to listen to one another. It's something our society is in desperate need of taking up! As I was rereading the text in preparation for the sermon, I realized that the theme about physical change (ie. circumcision) picks up a point that was made way back in the time of the Jewish kings.

I don't know if you all recall the story of how David was chosen to be king? The priest, Samuel, was commissioned by God to select a successor to (ironically and perhaps confusingly) King Saul?! Samuel is to go and see all of the sons of a faithful Jew named Jesse. Seven of them pass before Samuel, all of them tall and fit – archetypes of a strong king. But God tells Samuel, "Do not look on (their) appearance or on the height of (their) stature, because I have rejected (them), for Yahweh does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but

Yahweh looks on the heart.” Samuel asks if there are any other sons, and Jesse summons David; basically described as the “runt of the litter.” And, he’s The One. He’s the one Yahweh judges to have the heart of a king who will be faithful to Yahweh (no matter how flawed he is as a human being).

The exact phrase that describes how God judges the right “people for the job” is used in today’s text to speak about the evangelists who will serve as apostles. After listening to the debate in the Council meeting, Peter steps forward and says, “Friends, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. *8 And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as (God) did to us, 9 and in cleansing their hearts by faith (God) has made no distinction between them and us.*”

This is such a powerful statement! And a humbling one for those who may have felt they understood the ways of Yahweh, which included authorization for them to serve as gatekeepers. They thought they knew the standards that made for a faithful Jew-made-Christian. Well, the gentile world just didn’t care about that, and it didn’t make any sense to them. All “circumcision” – or any other hurdles that didn’t involve acceptance of the Holy Spirit – would serve, as Peter explains, is as yokes around their necks. “Do you really want to bind these people,” he’s asking, “who are on fire with the Holy Spirit of God, with old fashioned, and frankly, irrelevant, traditions? I don’t think we do! God is empowering these folks to claim the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ so that it has powerful implications on the way they understand their relationships with one another and the world. Why would we burden them with this? Why would we stunt their spiritual growth by weighing it down with

something that even the best of Jews couldn't bear?" Peter had experienced first hand that keeping kosher, and NOT eating with gentiles, would have quenched the moving of the Spirit in Cornelius' household – that was another one of those yokes that needed to be dropped!

When Peter stops speaking, you can almost hear the wheels turning in the minds of the gathered assembly. In the silence, Paul and Barnabus speak up and share their experiences. They had travelled to Cyprus, and parts of present-day Turkey sharing the gospel with anyone who would listen. Some would have been Jews who had made their way to those parts of the world. But of course they would've had non-Jewish friends with whom they associated who took notice of the story of Jesus the Christ. And the word was received with joy and thanksgiving. The Holy Spirit had opened hearts and made a way.

Barnabus and Paul explained to the Council that during their journeys it didn't occur to them to make these glad and grateful people be circumcised. And if they hadn't already, they would soon come across women who were the primary receivers of the good news – in fact, it will happen in the next chapter in Acts when they receive a vision of a man in Greece who beckons them to come, and to everyone's surprise—except the Holy Spirit's, of course—it is a woman named Lydia—a woman of means—whom they meet, and whose entire household they end up baptizing in the name of the risen Christ. What purpose then would circumcision serve? None at all.

After the testimony of Paul and Barnabus, the Apostle James spoke up and using a quotation from the prophet Amos that speaks to the tearing down of the house of David, and rebuilding a new community with ANY who call on the name of Yahweh, James concludes the Council by helping them all see what God's

purpose is here, to further the story of God's grace through Christ Jesus. And no longer will there be a physical sign to prove who has received that grace, but it will be visible in their behavior – turning away from immoral activities, and living out the love of God.

James sums up the Council's decision: 19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we shouldn't make it more difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God."

And while the final action of this Council falls outside of the scope of what AnneMarie read, I think it is worth noting. The elders of the Council couldn't just say a word of great thanks for the bold work these earliest apostles embarked upon. No, they had to give it their stamp of approval, and offer an "authoritative word" as the missionaries prepared to go back out into the world. So they wrote a letter for two new Apostles, Silas and Barsabbas, to take with them when they joined Paul and Barnabas on the next leg of the journey.

"Even though we didn't commission these fellows to share the word of Jesus with you," I'm paraphrasing, "we want you to receive these brothers from our Council as testimony that we 'approve of their message.' So, keep doing what is right in God's eyes, and refrain from doing what is wrong. Best."

The hubris here is amazing. As they say in the South, "bless their little hearts." The Council members thought the newly baptized gentiles really cared what they thought. Once the newly minted apostles joined Barnabas and Paul out in the big, wild world (outside of Jerusalem), and met with the newly baptized communities, the fresh Christ-followers would look at that letter, and the stamp of the Council with whom they had NO RELATIONSHIP, and look at Paul and

Barnabus (whom they know!!) and be like, “What’s this?” And Barnabus and Paul would be like, “Don’t worry about it. Just nod and say thank you, and welcome the newbies into your home. And let’s get back to giving thanks and praising to God who has ‘circumcised our hearts’ {wink}, and opened them fully, so that we may serve from God’s grace and with the fullness of Christ’s love.”

Story of the three indigenous folks on an island who are “discovered” by missionaries. “Holy God, you are three, we are three, have mercy on us.”

Those to whom the Holy Spirit led these early apostles didn’t need permission from a Council with whom they had no affiliation. They were too busy doing the work of the one who had freed them from any tethers that bound them to authoritarian rule. It’s a good and important message for us today. The Presbyterian side of our church family is known for needing to do things “decently and in order.” Well, sometimes the Holy Spirit mucks things up. And the traditions we feel obligated to hold onto for dear life can actually be yokes that weigh us down, keeping us from going where the Spirit is calling us. There’s a delicate balance involved in being associated with a larger Council that holds us accountable to the wisdom of the Church, but also opens us to the messy, and sometimes risky, work to which the Holy Spirit calls us.

As we were in the process of forming our new church, we saw the opportunity we were afforded to latch onto the coattails of the Holy Spirit as She came alongside us and beckoned us forward. I appreciate the stories in the Acts of the Apostles as available reminders not to get mired down by the things we’ve always done (or even *think* we’ve always done). Because God is constantly calling

for us to explore the ways and places where others need to hear the good news, and be empowered by the Spirit to claim no less than an abundant life. And so as we wind down this sermon, let's recall the words of our congregation's mission and purpose statement. Listen for some themes within that connect us with today's story:

This church boldly embraces a collaborative call to live intentionally as followers of Jesus Christ, sharing boundless love in a complex world.

Grounded in God's grace:

we nurture kindness and compassion,

advocate justice for all creation, and

spark a new vision of spirited hope.

At yesterday's Writers' Circle Retreat, Barb shared with us a profound paragraph of poet Mary Oliver's that speaks to this call. It is from Oliver's collection, *House of Light*: *(my formatting)*

Ten times a day

something happens to me like this –

some strengthening throb of amazement –

some good sweet empathetic ping and swell.

This is the first, the wildest and wisest thing I know:

that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.

Let us focus our awareness, be attentive, to the movement of the Holy Spirit in this, real God's World, so that our hearts and souls may soar. Amen.