

Texts: Acts 15:1-18

Subject: Council at Jerusalem

Theme: Faith Alone

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Risen Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

It never fails. We plan vacation or a camping trip, and we forget something. More than once, we've pulled out of the driveway only to have to turn around and go back in the house for one more thing. Okay, fine - it's me - *I forget* something. It's tough to keep account of all the needed items, especially when you have 6 people in the household. I know it's not just me, right? I started keeping a list in my phone, of all the things I should have brought along when we go camping, just in case, tools, lights, accessories - all those things that I think I might like to have along for the trip. Then I'll forget something major, like water, or a jacket, or shoes. It's happened.

If I don't have what is needed, I'm forced to either find it, buy it, or rely on someone else who has what is required. Which would be fine, but sometimes it might mean that if I screw up and forget something - I can't fully participate in an activity, or do the task that needs to get done, or it might mean I don't get to eat. I get left out, or I find another way. Our world includes circles of insiders and outsiders. This weekend was the NFL draft, where players are judged for their skills, their physical abilities, their health, and their past behavior. It's a lot to live up to. Most of us can only imagine that kind of pressure. Some of these elite players will get picked for a team and a position, and some won't. Students graduating from high school this year, looking to go to colleges and universities have had to apply and submit information about their grades, activities,

and their character as well. Some will get into the institutions they desire, and others will not. So they will find another way.

One of the questions being asked in the early church was - "what is essential to being a follower of Jesus?" What is needed for someone to be a part of the new Christian community that was being formed and growing into areas populated with folks from outside the circle of Israel? Who is in, and who gets left out? Last week we heard how Phillip preached the good news of Jesus to the Ethiopian, and how the Spirit was leading these founding members of the church at Jerusalem to other places, and even the one persecuting Christians - Saul - had an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, and became Paul - who shared the Word throughout the region. And people from Syria, Phoenicia, Samaria, and Antioch were coming to believe in Jesus. This created some controversy

Until this time, the church was made up primarily of people who were Jewish. They saw that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise of the messiah - the one in whom the law was fulfilled, and they followed him, but their culture was still Jewish. They were still ancestors of Abraham and followed the law given to Moses - followed the teaching, *the torah*. Paul and Barnabas were preaching in Asia, others had gone out to share the gospel including James, brother of John who was killed, and Peter had been baptizing folks from outside the Jewish family - the gentiles - and welcoming them, but the question remained - what would they need to do to become fully a part of this new Jesus movement?

They setup a council meeting in Jerusalem, and again, the church leaders are required to discern, to pray and come to a decision about what it was that God was

inviting them into, how the Spirit was moving in this new time. There was already so much changing, and for gentiles to be fully included would be a massive change for those who had been Jewish their whole lives. Last week we heard about a eunuch who was baptized and believed. This week, we get to talk about circumcision, but before we assume that the early church was obsessed with what is in a person's pants, I want to clearly state that *God cares more about what's in our hearts than what is below our waists*. Ok? We know this.

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham - this goes back to before Moses. Those who followed the Jewish faith and practice were required to follow the law, to live in a way that demonstrated you were part of God's chosen family. To go beyond the law was to follow other gods, other ways, and foreign practices. Grace was still real - salvation under the law still came by God's grace and mercy. Lutherans didn't invent that - but it's an important distinction. Does following the law bring us grace? Do our deeds and practices make us worthy of God's love and mercy? Or it is something else?

The old saying goes, 'rules are made to be broken.' My kids know the rules of our house, but they still struggle to follow them at times. They know hitting is not allowed, but does rough play violate the rule? Running the house is against the rules, but what if they're really in a hurry? Can they break the law and still receive privileges?

This was the question and they wondered and debated, and Peter, who had previously baptized the gentile Cornelius, who saw the Spirit fall on the people of Cesarea, who already declared to the council at Jerusalem, "God gave them the same gift that He gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 11:17). There was

still a question about the law. How can these new believers *truly* be a part of the church? We know they have the Spirit, but they still have to follow the law, don't they?

As followers of Jesus, we know the law. We read the ten commandments. We know we're not supposed to put our trust in anything but God. We aren't supposed to steal or murder or wish we had what our neighbors have. Do we break these laws? Sure. In big ways and small, we violate the boundaries God has set for all creation. We trust in governments, and bank accounts. We kill with words and thoughts. We steal time and hoard what could be used for the benefit of our neighbors. The boundaries of the law open our eyes to our need for forgiveness. We can't fix ourselves. There must be something we need to bring us back into right relationship with God, back into a balance with the world around us, to rebuild and restore us to who we were meant to be. It's not money. it's not perfect behavior. It's got nothing to do with our bodies.

We are saved by God's *Grace* through *Faith* alone.

Faith alone is all we need. Faith alone. And we don't own it, can't add it up or count it as our own achievement. Faith comes through the hearing of the Gospel - the good news of Jesus who died and was raised from the dead. The Spirit moves in us, and makes us believe, grants us faith and with that - we have everything we need to be a part of the ever-expanding, loving embrace of God, who is our life.

Peter declares that God has already made the decision. God, who knows all our hearts, has given the Holy Spirit. James, one of the leaders in the early church and the brother of Jesus, testifies as well and finishes his speech with a quote from the prophet Amos (9:11-12):

*After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;*

*from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord —
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called*

The word here for dwelling can be *tent or booth*, it might also be translated as *house* of David - the family of David - which we can rightfully associate with Jesus - the One who fulfills the promises of scripture. Jesus who was destroyed on the cross - who was rebuilt - raised up by God on the third day, who is fully God, and the source of our salvation. In Jesus we have *faith alone*.

We have received the Spirit in baptism, maybe it happened as infants, or maybe later in our lives. We hear the Word, we dwell in the Word, we *abide* in the word and we have faith. The world is changing rapidly, and we might worry that it's changing too much. But God's Spirit leads us in our lives everyday as we face change, and as we try to discern what is best, what is right, and what is needed now. When we have faith, we have everything we need. We're not left out, not required to achieve, but only to believe, and when that gets hard to do, the Spirit still shows up. We gather here that we would be strengthened in the Word, and renewed in grace through the Lord's Supper, strengthened by the community of believers around us. And we are sent out in the Spirit so share faith with others. We proclaim the good news of Jesus with our words and with our lives, the rest is up to God.

Amen.