

All Saints Talk for Sunday, 20th October 2024

Thoughtful Leadership

Acts 15: 22-35

Unity in the church - Emma King

In our reading today, we find a crucial moment in the early Christian church's history.

A problem arose: Should Gentile believers be required to follow Jewish laws, such as circumcision, to be saved?

The result of this conflict not only speaks to how the early church handled disputes but also reflects a deeper truth about the gospel—God's grace is for everyone.

As I explored this passage, I really found it wonderful how the church navigated this issue with wisdom, grace, and a heart for unity.

The Problem: There was Division Over Tradition

The early church faced a serious question—whether Gentile Christians had to follow Jewish customs like circumcision and dietary laws.

Some Jewish Christians believed that following the Mosaic Law was essential for salvation.

This created confusion and division within the church

This problem mirrors conflicts we often face today.

How often do we struggle with our own “traditions” or personal preferences in the church, we often like things the way we like them, and sometimes we struggle to do things differently.

The church then, like today, needed guidance in balancing tradition with the newness of life in Christ.

The Solution: Seeking God's Wisdom Together

The apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to seek God's wisdom on the matter.

It wasn't just a few people deciding—they involved the whole community of believers.

After the apostles and church officers met, the whole church gathered. The entire church agreed with the conclusion reached by their leaders.

The apostles did not send off the letter without meeting with the entire church.

After much discussion and prayer, they came to a decision:

salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ. Not by customs put upon us.

Isn't this wonderful!!!

This is the heart of the gospel!

Salvation is not something we earn or achieve through human effort, but it is the free gift of grace.

They chose unity in Christ over division caused by external rituals.

While Jewish Christians could maintain their customs, Gentile believers were not bound by them.

Yet, in a spirit of love and unity, the church did recommend that Gentiles follow certain practices

- like abstaining from food sacrificed

- to idols,
- blood,
- and sexual immorality
- not to place heavy burdens on them, but to encourage unity and sensitivity towards their Jewish brothers and sisters.

A Message of Encouragement

The church in Jerusalem didn't just make a decision and send an email out to all in a bold bossy way—they made sure to communicate it clearly and lovingly to the Gentile believers.

They wrote a letter, sent it with trusted leaders and ensured it was received personally.

This wasn't a cold, business-like process but a warm, pastoral response.

I really love this!!

When the letter was read to the church in Antioch, the believers “rejoiced because of its encouragement” it says in v. 31.

The message was clear, there was a spirit of unity, and the affirmation of their inclusion in God's family brought joy and relief to the Gentile Christians.

This scene got me wondering....

How often do we communicate in ways that build up the body of Christ?

Do our words and actions encourage others, or do they create more burdens?

The Jerusalem church's decision was a model of both truth and love... speaking clearly about essential matters while allowing for freedom and diversity.

Strengthening and Encouraging One Another

The passage ends with Judas and Silas staying to encourage and strengthen the church in Antioch.

They weren't just messengers; they were ministers of grace.

Their presence, teaching, and support helped solidify the church's unity and faith.

Paul and Barnabas remained as well, continuing to teach and preach.

The issue could have divided the church, but instead, it resulted in greater unity and commitment to spreading the gospel.

This is a powerful reminder for us today: how we handle conflict or differences in the church can either build up the body of Christ or tear it down.

This passage challenges us to be a church marked by grace, unity, and love.

Encouraging unity, especially within a diverse community like the church, requires intentional effort, love, and a focus on shared values.

So how do we do that?

Focus on What Unites Us

The Gospel

- When we keep the gospel central, differences in tradition, background, or opinion become secondary.
- to spread the love of Christ, make disciples, and serve others. Working together toward a shared purpose builds unity.

- Embrace the differences in backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives within the church as gifts from God that enhance the body of Christ, rather than things that divide.

Practice Humility and Love

- True unity starts with understanding. Listening to one another, especially when we disagree, shows respect and opens the door to reconciliation and cooperation
- Unity grows when we prioritize the well-being of others and seek to serve one another in love.
- Seek to understand the struggles, fears, and hopes of those who may be different from you.

Encourage Open and Honest Communication

- When addressing difficult issues, we can do it with a spirit of love and grace, focusing on building up rather than tearing down.
- Unity is undermined by backbiting, gossip, and slander. Instead, encourage constructive conversations that seek to solve problems and uplift others.
- Conflict is inevitable, but how we handle it matters. Approach disagreements with humility, seeking reconciliation and understanding rather than victory.

Pray for Unity

- Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers, we read that in John 17:20-23... we should follow His example

Serve One Another in Love

- Serving together helps break down barriers, builds friendships, and reinforces a shared mission.

Model Unity in Leadership

- Leaders in the church must model unity among themselves. I've seen many church leaders that have had their own agendas. Disunity among leaders can spread to the congregation, while a unified leadership team sets a powerful example for others to follow.
- One of the many things I love about All Saints is just that. We are a united team.

Encouraging unity requires a heart aligned with Christ's love and grace.

When we prioritize the gospel, practice humility, communicate with love, and serve one another, we reflect the unity Jesus prayed for.

In a world that is often divided by differences, we see it every single day... and its heartbreaking for us.

Let us show the power of the gospel—where salvation is a gift from God to all who believe, and where unity is possible because of Christ's love for us.

This is so exciting that we have this!!!

Let's walk in that grace and invite others into the same freedom and joy.

Shall we pray...

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the grace that we receive through Jesus Christ.

Help us to be a people of unity, loving and accepting others as You have loved and accepted us.

Give us wisdom in our words and actions, so that we may build up the body of Christ.

Let us reflect Your grace in everything we do, for Your glory and to grow Your kingdom.

In Jesus' name, Amen.