

Everyone Does Not Celebrate Your Birthday, And That Includes the Christians

Acts 15:1-2

Acts 15:36-41

I've changed my mind.

Hard to imagine. A Baptist changing his mind. But that's exactly what I've done. I've changed my mind about the early church, changed my mind about the apostle Paul.

In the past, I read the first chapters of Acts and was quite impressed by the early church only to have that positive image quickly disintegrate, quickly dissipate, quickly destroyed. At first I was dazzled by Pentecost. The powerful preaching of Peter. The radical sharing of property and money. Christians courageously standing up to the high priest. People of God willing to go to jail for their faith. The bold witness of Stephen that got himself stoned. The Good News preached in what had been a despised Samaria. The dramatic conversion of Saul. The eventual acceptance of Saul by the Church when that very Saul had persecuted the Church. The Peter with a long track record of getting egg all over his face heals Dorcas. The unexpected encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch who ended up in baptismal waters. Peter having a vision and concluding that God treats all people alike. Paul and Barnabas evangelizing the gentile world. It's all very, very impressive. Almost, almost makes you want to go to church-----to be a part of something that great and that wonderful.

But then,-----but then comes the fifteenth chapter of Acts. And it is a bummer, a real letdown, a hard fall. If only they would have stopped at chapter 14. If only they had not told the whole truth, the entire story. But right there it is for our reading, the ugly, make you want to give up on church, chapter 15.

Listen once again to the ugliness.

“Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved.’”

In the early days of the church's existence there already were people who had it all figured out, who knew who was going to be saved and who was not going to be saved.

By the way, I also know it all and if you want to know your status, saved or unsaved, chat with me after the worship service and I'll tell you.

Paul and Barnabas weren't buying it. Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them. And they went up to Jerusalem to discuss the matter at hand.

Another observation. Not only did the Church have know-it-alls from its inception, but from the beginning of the steeples Christians also have argued and fussed with each other. And it's never stopped. These days it seems like the favorite past time of Christians is arguing and fussing.

Isn't that true? Read the religion section of a newspaper and it's all over the pages. And we Baptists seem to be the worst. "Battling Baptists" we have been called.

Well, as I said, it all started in Acts, chapter 15. Unfortunately, it does not get any better. By the time we get to verse 39 there's another fight. This time, though, the battle is between Paul and Barnabas. They get ticked off at each other. They are mad. They are fuming. It can't be worked out. And so---and so they go their separate ways.

Don't you find that sad? Tragic? Depressing?

Paul says to Barnabas, "Hey buddy, what would you think about us, you and me, returning to all the cities we have gone, visiting the believers in every city just to say hello and check up on them. Wouldn't that be fun? Wouldn't it be a blast to travel down memory lane together, just you and me?"

"Why yes," Barnabas replied. "And Paul, I've got an idea. Why don't we take John Mark with us."

Paul likes that idea about as much as we like the idea of a summer without a vacation. Paul doesn't care for John Mark because John Mark had deserted them in an earlier work.

A bit judgmental, aren't you Paul? Expecting others to be perfect, Paul, when you aren't perfect?

I'm with Barnabas on this one. If the church isn't about grace, it isn't church. Of course, you may disagree with me. I wouldn't be surprised if half of you not as wise as me Christians are with Paul on this one. Why you and I could probably get in a fight over who was right and who was wrong, Paul or Barnabas. We could fight about their fight.

Paul and Barnabas. Their disagreement became so sharp they parted company. Barnabas took John Mark with him, thank you very much, and Paul trotted off with Silas. I didn't need you anyway.

All that they had done together, all that they had accomplished as a team, both of them were willing to flush it down the toilet.

It's all rather disturbing, upsetting! Or, at least that's what I used to think. Now with 42 years of life under my belt, with almost 20 years of being a pastor, well, Acts 15 doesn't seem so bad. Rather, Acts 15, it seems to me, is a much needed lesson about life and church and relationships. Or put another way, Acts 15 can help us with our illusions about our faith community, our illusions with respect to others, and don't forget this one, our illusions about our self.

Acts 15 teaches us that the church is a place of arguing, a place of pain.

Some people think there is no place for arguing in the church setting, but I would beg to differ. I am aware that people live stressful lives and the last thing that is desired or wanted is to come to

church and have more stress added to the other stress. I understand that. And I know, as you know, that churches have argued and continue to argue over the silliest things. Actually, sometimes a church argument has to do with dynamics other than what the argument appears to be about on the surface. Often church arguments are about power and control. So don't hear me saying a faith community needs to be a place of bickering and pettiness. But not all arguments are in that category. Some arguments need to be argued. And I think that's the case with the issue in the first part of chapter 15. Paul and Barnabas needed to make the case again circumcision of the gentiles. And some of the arguments in the modern church today are worthy of the church's time and energy. Some folk want there just to be peace in the church. But a church that is not debating and discussing probably is not being relevant to its day and time. A church in which there are not disagreements about the complex situations of our world is in danger of becoming a combination of a club, a YMCA, and a Senior Center.

Of course, how a church argues is very important, but that's another sermon. Right now, I simply want to say that I've changed my mind, that the first part of Acts 15 doesn't seem so bad after all. I'm glad there was an argument over whether circumcision was required to be saved. And I'm glad the modern church is arguing about sexuality and patriotism and *The Prayer of Jabez* and the relationship of the church to other faiths. This is important stuff from which the Church must not, must not, turn its head.

But what about the split of Paul and Barnabas? I still think it was tragic. I still think it was sad. I still think Barnabas was right and Paul was wrong. But---and this is the new revelation for me, this is what I didn't see previously, it could have been worse than it turned out to be.

Think about it. Paul could have lined up his troops. Barnabas could have lined up his troops. And then someone could have won the war and then the loser could have been shut out from any work or position in the church. As it turned out, Paul went his way with Silas and Barnabas went his way with John Mark. They had a serious dispute but both continued working for the kingdom of God. No one tried to prevent the other from doing his thing for God. And that's not always been the case with the church. We've burned people at the stake. We've excommunicated. We've sent individuals to hell. We've spread lies and rumors. We've kept people off committees who disagree with us. Here they just go their separate ways. Here there's room for both of them. They may not hang out in the same county. They may not be best buds. They may not buy each other birthday presents, but there's room for both of them. There's enough work to go around and each does his own thing.

Which leads me to Wedgewood. Which leads me to the type of church we are trying to be. One option we have is to sit around and say that others are wrong and we are right. Our way is the right way and we expect others to fall in line with us. We can spend our time focused on what others in the church should be doing that they are not doing.-----And if people are doing something, we can focus on how they should fully appreciate our superior wisdom and do it the way anybody who had any sense would do it. That's an option.

Or, another approach is to be a permission-giving church in which everyone is encouraged to do what they feel led to do and how they feel led to do it within reason. I mean, we wouldn't go for An Eye for an Eye conflict resolution ministry. If someone wanted to put money in the church

budget for a spaceship to deliver plan of salvation tracts to Jupiter we wouldn't do that. Would we? But if someone can make a case for something, and if they don't want John Mark to go along, well, we'll just be happy they want to do something for Jesus. I mean, it's not like all Christians are doing something for Jesus. Wanting to do something for Jesus ought to be celebrated even if you don't care to do something for Jesus with John Mark or Deacon Diane or Righteous Ronnie or As Sour as Sour Milk Sam.

And here's an important footnote. Who knows, maybe, maybe in time the Christians will learn about grace, and change their minds about someone, and learn to celebrate the other person's birthday. Wouldn't that be nice!

You may know that Will's birthday is July 4th. One of the things we've always said is that because Will was born on a holiday "everybody celebrates his birthday." But it's not true. There's always someone, someone who will not celebrate a person's birthday. And let's be honest about it. It's not just other people not celebrating our birthday. It's also us not celebrating others. Let's be honest, we can all be like the last part of the horse to go over the fence.

I'm not excusing us. I'm just saying we and others in the church are works in progress.

In his book *From Brokenness to Community* Jean Vanier writes, "I love to see how human and like us the first disciples of Jesus were. As soon as his back is turned they start to fight among themselves: 'Who is the most important, who is the best?'" Vanier observes: "Community is the place where are revealed all the darkness and anger, jealousies and rivalry hidden in our hearts. Community is a place of pain, because it is a place of loss, a place of conflict, and a place of death. But," Vanier asserts, "it is also a place of resurrection."

Later Vanier writes: "Some will get on our nerves, others will attract us. But community means caring for *each* one."

Maybe we should say that together. Repeat after me. Some will get on our nerves-----others will attract us.----- But community means-----caring for *each* one.

Listen to me. I've been hanging out with the Christians now for some time. Yeah, I'm not always thrilled about it, but I've been hanging out with the Christians. And there have been times----well, I won't say it. But there have been other times too. And to my surprise, I'm not lying about this, I've seen it happen, many times I've seen someone celebrate a person's birthday when previously they really did not care for the individual, they flat out didn't like the other person. Right off the bat they didn't like them. Or, it can be the case that in time they didn't like an individual because of something said or done or not done. So with their major reservations about the individual they sidestep them. They go out of their way not to be around them. But then-----but then something happens. I can't really put my finger on it, but something inexplicable and glorious and wonderful happens and one day the person is able to celebrate the other person's birthday.

It's a beautiful thing. I've seen it happen many times. And it's a very beautiful thing.

