

**May 2, 2021 – (Easter 5 – Council in Jerusalem)
Sermon Text – Acts 15:1-18**

- After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets...so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called." -

I suppose I don't have tell you that it's been a most unusual year. We've had classes cancelled because of Covid, classes held remotely via Zoom because of Covid, and classes fully masked and social distanced because of Covid. But that doesn't mean we didn't continue to study the teachings of the church and learn what it means to be a person of faith. We have been focused this year mainly on the New Testament and the story of Jesus. So, when it came time to ask a question of those who are being confirmed, I asked, "Who is Jesus?" and "What does it mean to you to have Jesus as a part of your life?" Under normal circumstances, we would have had the students read their statements as a part of our worship, but we haven't quite made it back to normal yet. So let me share some of the student's insights with you as we begin this morning.

As I began reading, it seemed that Logan Schauer set the tone by referring to an internet discussion about why life in this world is so hard for so many people. The answer, proposed in the discussion, was that Jesus' life was no piece of cake, so why do we expect anything better? But the answers the students gave indicate that having Jesus as a part of their lives may, in fact, help them to overcome those difficulties. For instance, Logan Hadfield would say, "Jesus...helps me through lots of things and makes me believe in myself and overcome impossible adventures and journeys." For Mason, those hard things have so far taken the form of broken bones. He wants us to know that "Jesus is always there to help me though [my] injuries." Jack took a metaphorical approach, saying, "To me [Jesus] is my fortress, guarding me through the long and difficult steps in life. Jesus is a boat keeping me afloat from sinking into the sea." Elise wanted to remind us that Jesus changes lives. She said, "His story changes anyone who hears it. People who don't feel loved or cared for can always be sure that Jesus is there for them and loves them. He was willing to die on the cross for our sins. Which is why even though we don't always feel like it, we know that we have worth because we have worth to Jesus." And Blake adds that our life of faith is about more than a single, momentary thing, but a discipline which continues through life. "His name is power and that power he willingly shares with me...Having Jesus in one's life is

more than just a hobby; it's a lifestyle that I willingly go through because of what he did for me."

I was quite happy to read all of that. Teaching and learning continued despite all of the difficult circumstances with which we had to deal. In a few moments, the six of you will all come forward and stand before the members of this congregation. You will affirm the promises that your parents and sponsors made for you in your baptism, as you have seen and heard Lexi's parents and sponsors do for her already this morning. You will promise to continue to live your life as a follower of Christ and to be an active part of this congregation. At the same time, the congregation will promise to continue to be with you and support you in your decision, as they have already been doing. They will be your community of faith and you will be part of their particular family of God. That's it. You will be declaring that you will continue to live the lifestyle of following Jesus. And they will go with you and continue to encourage you on your journey of faith.

In our reading for today, you have heard that there were some folks in the early church who wondered about this ongoing and supportive relationship. They complained that some of the newer members of the church were not following the same rules as they had learned as part of their former, strictly Jewish, faith. They thought that was wrong, and that maybe they shouldn't be so supportive. The issue boils down to this: "Do people need to become Jews first, in order to be followers of Christ, or can they go directly to being believers in the family of God?" It's a major conflict. It requires a decision. So the church assembles all of its early leaders for a council in the city of Jerusalem. They are a quite an interesting group. There is James, the brother of Jesus, leader of the Jerusalem church. There is Peter, the rock, the impetuous disciple, former denier of Christ, recommissioned to care for Jesus' sheep, now a proclaimer of good news to Jews and gentiles alike. And there is Paul, former persecutor of the church, converted through his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, now become the most profound proclaimer of the Christian message. And there is Barnabas, faithful companion and defender of Paul, who was a most influential elder in the early church community.

Here it is no less than Peter who begins to recount his experience with the spread of the gospel. He tells of how gentiles, non-Jewish people, some of them Roman soldiers and other clearly non-believers, have come to hear the good news and responded with faith. "And God," he tells the others, "Who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us." In other words,

“This is not our doing. This is God’s doing. God is choosing. God is deciding. God is empowering. God is giving them faith. So, who are we to stop them? Who are we to put obstacles in their way? Who are we to erect barriers that will keep them out? Who are we to expect that they will follow rules that God does not even seem to care about? Who are we?” The conclusion, I assume is that we are not God; and, if God wants it, and God certainly seems to do so, then we should not stand in the way!

God wants to every-one to be included. That is James conclusion. He searches the Hebrew scriptures, and quotes a passage that indicates God’s desire for complete inclusion. This is why the nation has been reestablished. This is why the people have come home from exile. This is why the temple has been rebuilt, “So that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.” God wants everyone to be included. God wants everyone to come to faith. God wants everyone to follow Jesus. Who are we to want to keep them out? Yes, we do have some rules. We need them as guidelines. You’ve now completed the worship notes and you’ve attended the classes. You’ve given us the opportunity to help you understand the faith you are a part of. And now you make that promise to go even deeper into your relationship with Jesus Christ. And I want you to remember, “You are included.” As Elise said, “You have worth.” “You have a place where you belong. It’s called ‘the family of God’ and it’s right here in this congregation!”

Amen.