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Acts 15
Theology in Real Time

Jeff O'Grady is the Pastor of a large Presbyterian church in California and currently serves as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Princeton Seminary. He is a native Minnesotan and told me the best training he received for being a congregational minister was his time working as an ice hockey referee. When you are refereeing hockey games part of your responsibility is to break up fights. The strategy, Jeff said, is that you don't jump in right away, you just try to hold other players back from getting involved in the fight and then you wait. You wait until the fighters tire themselves out. Then, when they actually want you to break them up, you insert yourself. If you go in too early, you are probably going to get punched, if you don't keep others out of the fight, you will lose control of the rink, but if wait just long enough and keep the other players on the bench then you will contain the situation. Perfect advise for pastoral leadership!

Everyone who has been involved in a church for sometime has lived through some controversy or inner church debate. They range from mildly annoying to very disruptive to all the way off the charts and horribly nasty. Remind me to tell you the story one day about the fight we had in the church in London over buying new highchairs—the children's ministry committee had a proposal to buy 10 new highchairs because the old highchairs were 50 years old and falling apart. The "fabric committee" that is British speak for buildings and grounds committee did not approve the request. They wanted the children's committee to get three quotes to have the old chairs fixed. The children's ministries committee got one quote, which was more than the price of buying new highchairs. The fabric committee then asked them to research different options for models of high chairs and present a new proposal. The children's ministries committee at this point was losing their minds. Members were saying they would just buy the high chairs themselves, others were saying this stuffy group of elders are too tight with the money. The drama trickles down to the Sunday school that the elders of the church did not want high chairs in the hall because it encouraged families to come with children and of course, they hate children. Members actually left over the high chair debate and I am pretty sure they still do not have new high chairs at the church. But I will tell you that story another day. If you ever find yourself on the bench watching a church fight—my advice is to stay in your seat!

Today we are about half way through the book of Acts—bravo to all of you who have been doing your daily readings—you have heard about some of the miraculous, and now we experience more of the mundane. The church is finding its feet and is fighting its way towards its genesis. And so we find two groups at odds with each other over what it means to be a Christian and the specifics of how you go about practicing the faith. There are some who have converted to Christianity who were practicing Jews. But we learned last Sunday, with Cornelius' conversion that is no longer the only pathway to discipleship—Gentiles, non-Jews, are now also converting to the faith.

On one side of the debate it was being argued that the that Gentiles needed follow all of the laws of Moses to be saved—circumcision, all of the dietary restrictions, and the 613 laws in the book of Moses or the Torah. This pro-Torah camp wants to put conditions on the Gentiles who want to join the faith. The other side, represented by Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James argued this was too restrictive and exclusive and the Gentiles should be welcomed to the faith without having to follow all of these rules.

Paul and Barnabas were said to have had no small dissension and debate about the matter with these men from Judea. That sounds to me like the way a good Presbyterian Clerk of Session would notate a major church brawl. “No small dissension and debate about the matter.” When the two groups couldn’t work it out among themselves they went to the Council in Jerusalem to discuss the question with the apostles and the elders. Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who’s in and who’s out?

In the middle of this debate, we see the two sides doing theology. They are trying to work out what they believe about God and salvation in the middle of this heated argument. Theology done in the middle of a fight is usually bad theology. Theology done in isolation is usually bad theology. In order to do good theology, we need each other but we need to be in positive relationships where we can hear and understand each other. Good theology requires debate and discernment and prayer and time. It seems that when these groups come together in Jerusalem to discuss the matter all of these essential ingredients to good theology are present.

And so we begin to hear from the two groups about their faith and their experiences and their fears. The one side cannot imagine how one could become a true believer without also observing the law. Peter, who has just had this amazing eye-opening experience with Cornelius, argues alongside Paul, that for Gentiles, the law will not be an avenue towards God but will place weighty restrictions on those seeking to follow Jesus. You can imagine their speeches imploring the other side to listen to reason. With Peter and James, Paul and Barnabas on one side and the apostles and elders in Jerusalem on the other—they argue, they tell stories, and they speak about their deepest convictions. The Jewish converts are able to tell how God has watched over them for generations and that the law was a gift to them to teach them how to be in community with one another—they don’t know another way to be faithful.

And those who had seen the conversion of the Gentiles were able to tell how the Holy Spirit called them into the faith and how they experienced grace and joy and community like they never knew before. Both stories of faith true, both experiences of the divine authentic—but how do they bring them together?

What emerges is a compromise—both sides give up a little but both sides still get to hold onto their core convictions and their theology in the process is refined. The Gentiles will not be asked to follow all of the law of Moses but they will be asked to adhere to certain essentials: avoiding food associated with ceremonies to

other gods, sexual immortality, and foods prepared in a certain way. The Gentile converts will accept the point of view that life as a Christian will impact their way of life. But the Gentile converts will not have to assimilate completely to a culture that is foreign to them.

The Jewish converts will not have to say ‘anything goes’; they will still get to live lives that are marked by their covenant with God. They will also accept that their experience of faith and conversion is not the only way God has been revealed. In this compromise, no side wins fully but both sides get to uphold their faith and their integrity—both sides now have learned from each other. Now they see and they believe that God has given us specific ways to live together and also that God has freed us from our former lives for joy and our new life as Christians. As far as church fights go, this one seems to have had a fairly storybook ending.

What the church in Acts in this situation reminds us, as scholar Matt Skinner writes, “is that faithful living is about being in a dynamic relationship with a living God and with one another. The meeting [in Jerusalem] is therefore not finally about winning an argument, crafting an effective strategic plan, refining customs, or making prudent judgments. The meeting [in Jerusalem] is about doing theology.” Theology is about considering who God is and therefore who we are called to be. For Christians, we are called to reflect on the person of Jesus Christ, the legacy he left, the teachings he implored, and the witness of the diverse group of people he called to be his followers.

The fight in Acts is a model for any fight be it office strategy conversations, household squabbles, political disagreements, or ecclesial debates.

*Come to the table ready to listen.

*Trust the other people in the conversation are as committed and as faithful as you.

*Be able to talk openly about what you believe.

*And be open to surprise and ready to compromise.

There are other times in Acts when the fights don’t go as well as this one. The very next story in the narrative is how Paul and Barnabas fall out with each other and decide to go their separate ways. What we know is that sometimes fights on the hockey rink end with teeth and blood and anger strewn on the ice. But sometimes it ends with the two sides sent to back to their benches and the game goes on. The Psalmist writes, “How good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.”

This church has had its own fights and squabbles through the years. But as of late, I think we have been pretty well behaved. We have occasional disagreements but we work them out and we find ways to compromise. I attribute this to the fact that you all fight enough in your day jobs that when you arrive at church you are just too worn out. I’m kidding. But actually I attribute it to our practice of theology—we have been able to do theology in real time—engaging in

conversations with each other about what matters most to us as followers of Jesus Christ.

What matters to us at Georgetown Presbyterian Church is that we worship a living God, that we are all welcomed here and known, that we have a big tent and people of all backgrounds and stages of faith are heard and valued, that we are trying to make our faith relevant and practical, that we have spiritual home where the young will be nurtured, the old will be nourished, and everyone in between has a seat at the table. That is theology of this church—it is what we believe about God and what we feel called to be. God matters to us and we matter to each other. And if we keep those two essential tenets in the forefront then the job of the pastoral referees become much easier. And for that, I am truly grateful.

Amen.