

The Gentile Problem

TEXT: Acts 10:44-48; Acts 11:1-3

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on January 22, 2023

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus' last words to his followers are: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Those aren't just *Jesus'* last words in that gospel. They are the final lines of the entire book of Matthew. The command has come to be known as The Great Commission.

Whether Jesus said exactly those words or not, his disciples clearly heard something along those lines because, once Jesus had gone, that's exactly what they set out to do, carrying his message far and wide. The travels of Peter, Paul, and a few others are documented in the pages of the New Testament, but church history tells us that Thomas went to preach in India, where there is an entire branch of Christianity named for him. James, the brother of John, went to Spain, a place Paul intended to go before getting thrown into prison messed up his plans. Paul actually wrote the book of Romans to try to convince the church in Rome to sponsor the ministry he wanted to undertake in Spain.

Clearly Jesus told them something that encouraged them to multiply their efforts beyond what Jesus could do on his own and take his message just as far as they could. I think it's that scope that Jesus is talking about when he tells his disciples in John 14:12 that, once he is gone, his disciples will do even greater works than Jesus did. Not greater in terms of more miraculous, but greater in their reach and scale.

But as they run out to make disciples of all nations, it seems that they hadn't thought about the fact that they might be successful. To be fair, a lot of them didn't live long enough to think about next steps. And Jesus had said nothing at all about what to do when Gentiles heard the message and signed up. Remember that Christianity did not exist as a religion distinct from Judaism for a couple hundred years after Jesus' death. Throughout the New Testament, those who came to believe Jesus was the Messiah were simply one of the many branches of Judaism that existed at the time. We talked about that complex religious landscape in first-century Israel during Advent.

When the number of Gentile followers was small, they converted and became Jews. But once Paul moved out of predominantly Jewish territory and started planting churches throughout Asia Minor, converting everyone to Judaism was very hard to scale. Why? Well, for one, the long list of kosher and Sabbath laws really takes a large community abiding by the same rules to keep. If you need kosher meat, you need a kosher butcher, for example. And in my entire lifetime of trying to keep a Sabbath in a 24/7 country—well, it was next to impossible even before entering ministry.

It was a struggle even as a teenager working at Burger King. I told my boss, "I go to church on Sundays. I don't work." He agreed. And then I'd look at the schedule and there I was, scheduled for a Sunday. I'd go back. "You put me on a Sunday. I don't work on Sundays." He'd change it. Next week, I was back scheduled on a Sunday. I didn't give up and he didn't fire me. But it never got better. It was a struggle nearly every week for all the years I worked there.

But beyond the laws that are simply much easier to follow when the social systems are set up for them, the sign of God's covenant with Abraham was circumcision. Babies had no choice in the matter. But adult male converts? "I have to do what now?" All put together, making Gentiles become Jews in order to follow Jesus was a hard sell at scale.

But both Paul and Peter noticed something else, as they preached to and converted Gentiles. All the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit that the disciples had seen at Pentecost were showing up among Gentile believers without any such conversion. So, they had to ask themselves, if God was blessing Gentiles in the same way as Jesus' Jewish followers, well, maybe some things aren't as important as we thought they were? Or maybe God has different rules for Gentiles?

As I mentioned last week, the book of Acts gives us a lot of context for most of the letters that follow, especially the letters of Paul. The outline of this controversy about Gentile believers begins with a vision that Peter has in Acts 10, where God prepares him to accept an invitation to the home of a Gentile to preach the gospel. The tension builds in the following chapters, and then culminates in a full-blown council of Jesus' Jewish followers in Jerusalem, described in Acts 15.

That council is led by James, who was the head of the Jerusalem church, and results in producing a modified set of rules for Gentile believers. That included eliminating the need for circumcision, which was a massive concession. Then they rounded up a bunch of couriers to take the news to all the churches, near and far.

However, the new rules for Gentiles didn't apply to Jewish followers of Jesus, even those in the same congregation. That created a two-tiered system of religious disciplines, which naturally led to the kinds of divisions we saw Paul dealing with in the church at Corinth last week. One of the questions prompting the Corinthian church to write Paul in the first place had to do with the conflicting sets of dietary laws. It was much easier for Jews to stick with Jewish law in churches in a predominantly Jewish city like Jerusalem than it was for Jews in a cosmopolitan trade center like Corinth. And Corinth wasn't the only place having issues.

Almost all of Paul's letters are, in one way or another, wrestling with the fundamental question of how far Judaism can stretch its traditions and how much it can adapt the Law of Moses before it is not really Judaism anymore. It's the subject of the entire book of Galatians, chapters 9-11 of the book of Romans, and is the subtext for most of 1 Corinthians. How do you make all that work?

Of all of Jesus' followers that we know about, Paul was the best suited for the job. Remember the context of his particular life and outlook. Paul was a Pharisee as was his father. Paul tells King Agrippa in Acts 26 that he is part of the strictest sect of his religion. But at least in the debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, remember it was the Pharisees who were the more liberal bunch. They were the ones who interpreted the law when circumstances changed to help people keep their faith alive in new and often difficult situations. The Sadducees refused to allow any adaptation or change and therefore died out almost overnight after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70.

Paul was well-educated, was zealous in his devotion to God, and was, at least at the outset, respected and trusted among the Jewish hierarchy in Jerusalem. He had a transformative conversion experience that dramatically shifted his priorities, showing Paul his own blindness to the difference between his life and teaching. He was a teacher and communicator, as was his father before him.

Paul knew the Law of Moses upside down and backwards as well as its history of interpretation. He was a Roman citizen, had experience with different cultures and religions, and knew the world beyond Israel. If anyone on the planet in the first century could find a way to blend a new sect of Judaism with Gentile adherents, it would be Paul; and that task is present if not central to almost every letter of his in the New Testament.

But, to be clear, Paul does not want to create a new religion, any more than Jesus did. Paul is still a Pharisee to his dying day, and goes out of his way to adhere strictly to Jewish law personally, even while allowing Gentiles to do otherwise. When Paul's closest mentee, Timothy, tries to go by the new rules established by the Council of Jerusalem for Gentiles because his father was Greek, Paul says nope...your mother was a Jew and you're getting circumcised. In fact, Paul does Timothy's circumcision himself.

On the road to Damascus, Paul did not convert in the sense of leaving his Judaism behind. He experienced a dramatic shift in his understanding of what it meant to be a Jew, and he began to plant new congregations with a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers that he still insisted were Jewish congregations. They were all part of the new sect called "The Way," but that was still under the Jewish umbrella. In his letters, we discover the nature of that new understanding.

In the book of Galatians chapter 3 Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." When he wrote to the Corinthian church, he made the same point by using the metaphor of one body and many members with Christ as the head. When he wrote to the church in Rome, he used the metaphor of Gentiles being grafted onto the tree of Judaism.

The Jews back in Jerusalem, however, did not see things his way. The more Paul adapted as he traveled and taught throughout Asia Minor, the more they saw someone trying to destroy their faith. That's what got him arrested when he returned to Jerusalem, even though he came bearing an offering specifically for the poor of the Jerusalem church that had been collected from the churches across Asia Minor.

If Paul had just said, "Nope, I'm out. This is a new religion and I want to spread it across the world," they would likely not have cared. But he was trying to claim that the faith he was spreading was still, in some way, Judaism; and that felt like a threat in Jerusalem.

What we are witnessing in much of the letters of the New Testament is the early church wrestling with the question of "At what point are we not Jews anymore?" That's an important question for religious history, and we know how that turned out. But their question also represents one of the most fundamental questions of human society, both then and now: How far can our sense of identity stretch before we become something fundamentally different? And is such a change acceptable to us? Is such a change death or is it resurrection?

Every part of the world is trying to come to grips with this as quick travel, global commerce, and instantaneous communication has brought us into contact with a diversity of others we could never have imagined even a century ago. At its root, it's the question of identity and borders. Who is "us" and who is "them?" Are those categories obsolete? If so, how do I live? Who do I trust? Psychologists have shown that children raised without boundaries often become suicidal as teens. A life without boundaries is terrifying and, in some ways, meaningless. We have a basic need to know where we belong; how we fit in. How do we navigate a shift in identity or a change in borders?

We hear people in the US either praise or disparage others in reference to being "real" Americans. How is that defined? By citizenship? By values? By the length of time you have lived here? By race? By your political allegiance? When is an American not an American anymore? When is a democracy not a democracy anymore? How do we define a family? What is gender? Who decides where a border is and who can cross it? The one with the most powerful army? The one with the most money? The United Nations? How much diversity of thought, race, culture, nation, mission, identity, and practice does it take before a social unit of any kind changes into something fundamentally different? And who gets to declare that line crossed?

What I want to highlight here is that the question facing Paul and the rest of Jesus' early followers represents the tension every single group faces when the identity that first defined it is faced with diversity and expansion, whether that is by choice or not. Do we harden the borders of what defines us and make others either comply or do their own thing elsewhere? Do we change the core identity of the group? Do we even know what that core identity is?

A related question is whether a change to something different is necessarily a bad thing. The issue of whether or not to integrate Gentiles into a new branch of Judaism (and, if so, how to do that) first becomes the question of "If we do this, are we still Jews?" But then the follow-on question is, "If we're not, is that okay?" And the follow-on to that is, "If we are no longer Jews, what are we? Are we forming something new to the world or are we joining a different group in some way?" And then, finally, if we are something totally new, how do we relate to what we left behind, if at all?

Sadly, when the followers of Jesus did become a distinct religion, the new Christians related to Jews with violence. Worse, the tensions around the issue that are evident in the New Testament and that Paul wanted to iron out, have been used to justify and even incite that violence, which continues to this day. And the bigger question of identity and borders for societies and nations lies at the root of most war. It is ravaging Ukraine as we speak.

While Paul was not ultimately successful in keeping Jews and Gentiles together under one religious roof, the various ways that he tried to help them find not just common ground but a common and loving bond is still very much relevant and worth our while. So, for the next few weeks, we'll be moving into some of the broad themes of his letters. Because they do have the ability to ease the tensions and conflicts of our own day. They can help us find our identity and place in the world. If we let them. Amen.