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11 o'clock am

Wilshire Baptist Church
Dallas, Texas

"Saved by Grace"

Acts 15:1-21

Ah, 'tis the season… of the 2016 presidential election. And isn't it fun already? Aren't we having a good time? It's like the best entertainment out there. Wildly stated opinions. Attacks on character. A narrowing down of the final candidates. You know, if you switched the end goal a bit it all starts to resemble certain reality dating shows.

Watching the election kick into gear and looking ahead to all of the debates over economics and foreign policy and race that are sure to come, I've begun to wonder: Do we how to argue as a church? Do we know how to have serious conversations about things we may deeply disagree about? The world has plenty to say. But have we lost the ability to earnestly hash out what God might have for us as we seek to follow the way of Christ in our time?

I say lost the ability because as our passage from Acts today shows, the early church was no stranger to arguments about the things that matter most.

If there was one pressing issue for the early church it was what to do with the uncircumcised Gentiles who had become believers. Unexpectedly Peter had been given the surprising news that the Gentiles were now a part of the salvation that was thought to be only for the Jews. The believers had come to an agreement that yes, Peter's vision of the unclean animals and the Gentile inclusion was from God. But that only began the discussion.

You see, even though the Gentiles hadn't been circumcised, they *could be* circumcised. It's not like it's an impossible requirement. And as Jim said circumcision was *the* mark of God's choice to work in and through Israel. It was a constant reminder of God making the covenant with Abraham. Of God walking through the animals split in two and promising to bring Abraham into the Promised Land. Circumcision was the proper response to the gracious action of God. As the Gentiles became part of God's work in and through Israel, it would sorta make sense that they would be circumcised.

This was the exact stance of the pro-circumcision group. Of course, the Gentiles need to the circumcised if they're to be taken into God's covenant.

Now Acts tells us that this pro-circumcision group were from a sect of the Pharisees. The Pharisees get a really bad rap, but there are actually a lot of admirable qualities about them. They were the ones who took Scripture seriously and who had maintained the

traditions in the face of secularizing forces. The Sadducees on the other hand basically just turned themselves over to the Roman political powers of the day. The Pharisees at least seriously wanted to be faithful to God even if they sometimes got it really, really wrong. They helped to preserve Jewish identity through times when it was really hard to be a Jew.

Pharisees have the typical virtues and vices of conservatism. Conservatives help the community remember who they are, but they can also get that remembering wrong. They help the community maintain its identity over time and under pressure, but sometimes they misunderstand what that identity actually is. It's sort of like Christians today who claim that the United States was founded as a Christian country. What's forgotten is that only 17% the population were church-going Christians in 1776. In 2000 that number was 62%.[1] What's also forgotten is that many of the founding fathers were not Christians at all but deists. History is misremembered and society is held up to a standard that never actually existed.

Identity myths abound, but what was the story that was in danger of being forgotten in 1st century Jerusalem? How did the pro-circumcision group misunderstand *Christian* identity? I think the answer is found in Peter's response to the apostles and elders.

The leaders of the church have gathered to try to make sense of what God's work in the Gentiles and decide what to do with their inclusion. They've gone back and forth and back and forth over these difficult Gentiles until Peter finally stands up: "My brothers," he says. "Why are you making these Gentiles bear a yoke that we haven't even been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

See what the pro-circumcision group had forgotten was grace. Just 15 chapters since Jesus has ascended into heaven and the believers have already forgotten the good news. They've forgotten that salvation isn't about humans reaching up to God, but about God coming down to seek and save the lost. They had forgotten that this whole salvation thing wasn't about them. It was about God. They had so deeply forgotten grace that they had even mis-remembered what circumcision is about.

Remember: circumcision is a sign of God's covenant with Abram. And what was Abram's role during the making of the covenant? He was sleeping! He wasn't doing anything. He was lying there unconscious while God made all of the definitive moves. Abram was simply

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[1] Claude S. Fisher, *A Christian America? What History Shows*, Made in American: Notes on American life from American history. https://madeinamericathebook.wordpress.com/2010/03/26/a-christian-america-what-history-shows/ (May 26, 2010).

receiving. Receiving God's covenant to him and to all of Israel. Circumcision isn't an act of salvation. Circumcision is a way to remember the salvation that God has accomplished. It's fundamentally a sign of grace. It's not grace itself, but it was a sign of grace.

It's no mistake that grace is what was forgotten so quickly in the early church's arguments over the Gentiles. It's what's forgotten so quickly today as well. We say that we believe that we are saved by grace through faith, but then somehow we find ourselves thinking that if we make the right financial decisions and go to the right schools and marry the right person and buy a house and have two kids by the age of 40 that that is in fact what is going to save us. That those are the things that are going to bring us joy and peace and abudance—the signs of salvation. Now those things are all fine, but they just don't have the power to save us. Anyone who has had a difficult marriage or gone through extended unemployment or who lost their house in the Great Recession knows that reality. Grace, God unconditionally acting on our behalf, is what saves us.

It's really hard to get a handle on what grace is. It's such a Christiany term that I think for most of us it has just about lost its meaning.

But I think there's a story the Old Testament tells us that might help us get a fresh understanding of grace. The story is that of Jonah.

If you remember back, God commands Jonah to preach to the Ninevites. Jonah doesn't say anything back to God, but boards a ship going the exact opposite direction of Ninevah. Out on the open sea, the ship gets caught in a raging storm and the crew decides that God must be punishing one of them for sending such a gale. They cast lots to determine who the guilty party is and the lot falls the Jonah. Jonah tells them that they must cast him overboard so that the storm with stop. So over he goes into the limitless ocean depths, sinking farther and farther into the dark fathoms of the sea, away from all that he knows, approaching death when the Bible says "And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights." After that the fish vomits Jonah up onto the land and Jonah goes to preach to the Ninevites.

That is the perfect picture of faith and grace. Faith is a letting go. It's a release into God's hands. A dropping into the depths. And grace is the fact that when you let go something catches you. Grace is what doesn't have to be. What isn't guaranteed. And yet still *is*. Grace is the fish.

As the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard put it, having faith in God's grace means swimming in water seventy thousand fathoms deep. We're way out on the ocean. We don't get to stabilize ourselves and try to touch the pool bottom with our feet. In fact, the only thing that

justifies our decision to venture out on the waters in the first place is that "the water can and will, if we let it, hold us up."[2]

Faith is nothing other than us stopping our thrashing around in the water drowning ourselves and everybody around us. But notice it isn't stopping the thrashing that saves us. The water buoying us up saves us. Grace saves us. But it is grace through faith. Through a spirit that has decided to depend upon the grace that surrounds us all.

This past summer I was a leader at our church's youth camp, and the theme of camp was "In Tune." I loved that theme because what is points to is that this Christian life of faith is nothing more than tuning into the music that already surrounds us. The music never has stopped, we've only stopped listening. Instead of letting our lives get caught up in God's song we've decided that thrashing around in the water seems like a better idea—because at least we have an illusion of control.

I know why we want that illusion of control. It's risky to trust God! It's risky to tune into music whose tune we're not familiar with. It's risky to swim in waters 70,000 fathoms deep.

It's risky because it's not certain. Like Jonah we can't know for sure if jumping into the dark waters will lead to our death or our salvation. Yet what Christians have for two thousand years testified to is that time and time again we find ourselves right where we need to be.

You know, this is supposed to be a sermon about how to argue as the church. How in the world did we end up at grace? We ended up at grace because the church doesn't argue like the world does. The church's standards aren't the world's standards. And it's important for us to remember just exactly what our standards are. Our standards were and are God's grace. You see for you and me we probably wouldn't have even been the ones arguing back there in Jerusalem with the elders and church leaders. For the vast majority of us in this room, we're the Gentiles. We're the uncircumcised. We're the ones being argued about. We're the ones who weren't supposed to be included—and yet here we are. If anyone should argue from grace, it should be us. Who are we to try to argue from anywhere else?

The unique and wonderful thing about this morning is that I only know bits and pieces of your story. I've only heard parts of who you've been and who you're becoming in Christ. But I do know the story of the church across time. It's the story of walking out on the waters and then beginning to sink beneath the waves. It's the story of falling into God's grace and then clawing at the air on the way down. So Community Church of Issaquah, as you argue and grow, as you

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[2] Phillip S. Wasburn, *The Mystery at the Heart of Things: Ten Sermons for Both Mind and Heart*. (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2008) 22.

remember and rediscover your identity, as you have faith, hear these words: God's grace will sustain you. God's grace will hold you up. Wherever the great fish takes you in the days ahead, you will end up where you're supposed to be. Not because of what you have or what you will do but because the fish is God. So in that knowledge let us be who we in fact are: Gentiles, uncircumcised yet included, reveling in the vast ocean of God's grace. Amen.