

Text: Acts 15: 1-18  
Title: At a Fork in the Road  
Date: 05.14.15  
Roger Allen Nelson

Canadian singer-songwriter, Bruce Cockburn, wrote a Christmas song with this chorus:

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river  
Driving the ripples on forever  
Redemption rips through the surface of time  
In the cry of a tiny babe*

Cockburn is writing about the mystery of the incarnation changing the waters of creation. We've been working with that same image. In the resurrection God throws a rock into the normal order of things and a new reality begins to ripples outward.

And the power of that new reality reaches beyond a few gobsmacked women and frightened disciples, beyond Hebrews to Hellenists to God-fearers, and beyond those who are straight to those whose sexuality is suspect. The resurrection ripples and reaches and rolls out unimpeded. Thanks be to God!

Well, sort of....

This morning's text tells the story of a barrier. This morning the good news of the resurrection runs into religion. This morning the movement of the Spirit butts up against the limitations of social constructions. This morning the gospel of grace confronts the requirements of the law.

So, while this may not be the most exciting, urgent, or angst-filled text, maybe there is here a helpful, practical, guide for grateful living. Even here, is there something about how we might live in the wake of the resurrection?

Let's put this text in context.

The preceding chapters tell stories of the good news of God in Christ being received by Gentiles. So, for example, Acts 14 closes with Paul and Barnabas reporting to the church in Antioch that God "opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." All is well. Thanks be to God. Let's have a potluck.

But, our text takes a sharp turn. "Certain individuals" come from Judea to Antioch to offer a correction. Think of it as a denominational delegation coming down from Grand Rapids to set things straight for those of us living out here on the edge of the wilderness....

Upon their arrival, the Judeans began to teach that Gentile believers must be circumcised, and presumably observe the rest of the Law, in order to be saved. They were, in effect, saying that to be a Christian you must first be a Jew. In order to follow Christ; you must first follow Torah.

That teaching inspired "no small dissension and debate" (NRSV). And, when no consensus emerged about the relationship between Jesus and Torah, the church in Antioch sent Paul,

Barnabas, and some others to consult with the church leaders in Jerusalem. They all went back up to Grand Rapids to hash things out.

It seems worth noting that from the very beginning the church is marked by disagreement. The resurrection is rippling out, people are being healed, faith is taking root, communities are gathering around the work and teaching of Jesus, love is being embodied....

and there are squabbles,  
and conflicts,  
and divisions,  
and flawed leaders,  
and questions about what this all means.

And with that, dear friends, we're at the fork in the road. I don't mean between Antioch and Jerusalem; I mean in this sermon. Do we take the path that explores the question of circumcision? Do we unfold the problem of first being a Jew in order to be a Christian?

Or, do we turn toward the process? Do we consider how the early church resolved this dispute? When the early church was at a fork in the road how did they decide which way to turn?

A few years ago, the Reformed Church in America was a crossroads about same sex marriage. For over twenty years there had been debate

about RCA pastors officiating at same sex weddings,  
about gay folks serving in ordained office,  
and about how best to love, welcome, and make "room for all."

This was no small dissension and debate; it was tearing the denomination apart. There were organized, funded, entrenched advocacy groups at either end of the question. There were books and rallies and position papers and study groups and prayer groups and congregations were leaving the denomination and.... And there was no clear way forward.

Therefore, at Synod (the annual national gathering) in 2015 the Reformed Church in America decided to convene what they called "The Jerusalem Council." They undertook a two-year process that tried to follow the pattern for how the dispute was resolved in this morning's text. They wanted to find clarity, common ground, and the will of God, so they charted a path that reflected something of the way in which the early church moved forward.

As we come to a fork in the road,

when we are confronted with questions,  
when we don't know what to do but want to be faithful,  
maybe there's guidance in this morning's text ~ practices of the first century church that are worthy of our imitation.

So, I want to offer four observations from our text. These are not earthshaking observations, but I do think that for almost any question or crossroad there is help offered here....

First, the counsel of the community is considered.

There are no Lone Ranger Christians. Despite the contemporary emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus, or the encouragement to “you do you and I’ll do me,” the testimony of scripture is that faith is lived out in community. To follow the way of Jesus is to be shoulder to shoulder with others ~ others whom you love, who drive you crazy, and in whom you take great delight. The resurrection doesn’t reach out to atomized individuals, it reaches out to all of us ~ together.

Therefore, when a dispute arises, when dissension escalates, the church gathers the voices of many places, personalities, and perspectives. And, while not a democracy the church trusts the cacophony of the community’s voice. It takes hard work to listen to and love those with whom you disagree and don’t even like, and change can be slow and messy, but there is wisdom to be found in the community’s voice.

Second, testimony is offered.

At the gathering in Jerusalem some stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.” And with that introduction there was a communal discussion, but our text records that then Peter told of his experience, followed by Paul and Barnabas telling what they’d seen and knew to be true among the Gentiles. They offered testimony.

It is easy to discredit experience because it is so fleeting, our understanding is often flawed, and we easily get things wrong, but there is weight given here to experience. Human experience matters. Our stories matter. If God is leading there would be some evidence ~ in this world, in our lives, in the lives of others. Testimony is given as evidence.

I recently met with a young father trying to make sense of how his bright-gifted-wise-faithful-spiritually-sensitive wife and daughter couldn’t serve in ordained office in their church. We talked about how scripture is interpreted, but what I wanted for him was time at Hope to see the robust life of women and men serving together as teachers, preachers, elders, deacons, leaders, servants. I wanted his children to experience what our children experience.

There is evidence of the rich blessing and will of God at Hope ~ not in the size of the congregation or balance of the budget, but in the faithful, strong, nuanced leadership of women.

Let us offer our experience as evidence of God’s activity.

Let us bear testimony to that gift of God.

Let us listen to the stories of others.

Third, scripture is consulted, considered, and given great sway....

The council in Jerusalem engages in discussion and listens to the testimony of those who saw the “signs and wonders” that God had been doing among the Gentiles.

But then, James rises to cite scripture. He claims prophetic agreement by quoting Amos. He recites a few lines picturing the *shalom* of God being extended to all humanity. There is nothing here about the gentile converts needing to follow the requirements of the law, there is an image of the reach of God beyond the Hebrews. There is scriptural precedent that this was God’s intention all along.

We open these scriptures, week in and week out, because this ancient, inspired, library contains God's will and way for all creation. While it might be smudged with human fingerprints, we believe that the unblemished light and love of God is revealed in scripture.

That is not to say that the Bible intends to be an answer book for all of the complexities of modern life, post-modern life, or pre-modern life for that matter. I don't think every ethical or moral dilemma is answered in scripture.

But, there is clearly a trajectory. There is the unfolding story of God reclaiming creation for *shalom* and the rippling out of the resurrection. Scripture enables us to see the character of God and recognize that character beyond scripture.

Fourth, make room for the Spirit.

There is a church sign in my neighborhood that reads, "God is not done speaking." I like that. The early church made room for the movement and leading of the Spirit of God.

When Peter stands up to speak he points back to revelation of God's Spirit that he experienced, that they shared, and that led to the proclaiming of the gospel to the Gentiles. And, now that the Gentiles were responding to that gospel, now that there was evidence of God's spirit among them....

wasn't the Spirit also leading to a new way of understanding the role of Torah in their lives in the lives of the Gentiles?

God is not done speaking.

In *Bird by Bird: Some Thoughts on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott writes,

*E. L. Doctorow once said that 'writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.*

Dear friends, while we may not fully know the road ahead, while we will be faced with questions and complexities, there is enough light in community, testimony, scripture, and the leading of the Holy Spirit to make the whole trip. While we may not know which way to turn when we come to a fork in the road we have been given community, story, scripture, and Spirit as a light for our journey. Don't be afraid.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.