

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Reach: Restoring the Tent”

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Acts 15:12-21

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We continue this week in our “Reach” series, which of course is hitting on themes in the REACH Campaign, the building project and the missional effort, but more importantly we’re walking through a portion of the Book of Acts, Acts 15-16, which begins with what some call the centerpiece of the entire book. That’s what we started looking at last Sunday: the Council of Jerusalem.

We continue today in this crucial moment in the early church, going from hearing the question facing the church, and now hearing the church’s answer. Let’s go to God’s Word together, Acts 15:12-21:

The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the gentiles. 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, as it is written,

‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.’

“Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of New Life, we pray for your presence and restoration within us this morning. Truly by your Spirit you breathe newness into our souls, that we might be empowered to bear witness to the good news of Christ in how we speak and how we act, that others might see testimony that a new power is at work within the world. Breathe into us anew by your Word this morning, we pray, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The apostles and the elders had heard the need, the need for a decision to be made. The Holy Spirit was coming upon Gentiles in greater and greater numbers. On one hand, there were

those who said, well they must adhere to the law, to the sign of God's chosen people Israel, to circumcision (for the males, at least). But on the other, they heard from others, most notably Peter, who asked why they would put that burden upon these new converts when God had already demonstrated his welcome and empowerment of them.

That's where we left off last week. They hear from Paul and Barnabas testifying further to all God had done among the Gentiles, and then they hear from someone who otherwise we haven't heard all that much about: James. Not the original disciple James, but more likely Jesus' brother (half-brother, technically), a pillar in the church in Jerusalem. In fact he appears to be presiding over this great Council, as he and he alone stands up to render a verdict.

The verdict alone may not have been a matter for suspense. We talked last week how we more or less know how it works out in the long run at least. But it's noteworthy that he doesn't just jettison the entirety of the law. In verses 20-21 he notes aspects of the law, of behavior, even of dietary restrictions, which converts, both Jew and Gentile, should follow.

But on the pressing issue of circumcision, he says in v. 19, "I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God." We noted in more detail last week just what was at stake here, but this was a big deal, a big decision. It meant the church was putting the welcome of those God was calling from outside the circle as of greater importance than certain aspects of identity or tradition.

That part you knew. But something else that's powerful here is what he offers as the "why." He cites a couple of verses from the prophet Amos. Did you catch that part? "[The Lord said] after this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling [or 'restore the tabernacle' or 'tent', depending on the translation] of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up." It's talking about restoring the people of Israel after their exile.

At that point you might expect the prophet to say something like, "so that Israel might be renewed." In other words, restoring the people for the benefit of that same people. But it doesn't. What does it say? What's the reason for this restoration?

V. 17, again citing Amos: "so that all other people may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called." The very purpose of this restoration work wasn't primarily for what or who was being restored; it was so that all other people may seek the Lord because of that restoration.

We're talking a lot about restoration work. When you go into this week's devotional that Pastor Mark put together, you'll see questions about it. But like the promise of the restoration in Amos and Acts, the purpose isn't primarily for the benefit of what's being restored. It's for all those others who may seek the Lord as a result.

You heard me say it over and over again last week. May we rededicate ourselves to being a church concerned for those who aren't here yet. And all this talk about restoration, it's not primarily for the sake of those who are already here. It's for the sake of all those who aren't here yet.

But don't take it just from me. As part of this campaign, we invited a few households to share their own thoughts, not just about the scope of the campaign, but about the why for it too, about the impact of it. Today, we'll hear from three couples: Laura and Jordan Simmons, Cammy and Mike Glover, and Mandy and Daniel Watson (the directors of The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy).

[play video]

Remember something Cammy Glover said: "God's in the business of restoring lives." That's a big reason why we felt led to partner so significantly with our friends at The Restoration House—I mean it's in the name. Many of you know The Restoration House, focusing on equipping and empowering single mothers and the households they lead. They are one of our most cherished local mission partners.

But over the past couple of years, a team led by Lee Dilworth has been discerning how God was leading us not only to shape the use of our building but our focus in ministry and mission. We were in search of something that a focused commitment from a church like ours of time, effort, and yes, capital could really make an impact.

As it happened, our friends at The Restoration House were looking at opening a new early childhood education center. They recognized, as many a parent will already know, that after housing the single greatest financial demand is the cost and availability of quality early childhood education and childcare. So they had been developing Olive Tree Early Learning Academy.

And based on our commitment to them in good faith around this time a year ago, Olive Tree launched last Fall, counting on us to come through for them in supporting the upfront costs and renovations to their facilities. You'll remember from last week that our Session has committed 20% of this campaign toward Olive Tree. Like Daniel said in the video, "We want our friends at Sequoyah Hills to know that any contribution to the REACH Campaign is not only making an investment in the community at Sequoyah Hills but every day making an investment in over 140 families at The Restoration House and Olive Tree."

But then even regarding the building, we're going to be in restoration mode here too.

(11:00) Quick question. Would it be fair to say that as a church we highly value and prioritize our music ministry? Absolutely. Now the next one. Does our building communicate that

we highly value and prioritize our music ministry? Anybody been downstairs lately? Let's do something about that.

Or anybody been in some of our restrooms? We're already underway on this part, but we're updating bathrooms throughout the building, because honestly, y'all, there are a few of them that, well, the eighties called and they wanted their bathrooms back.

Or anybody been into some of the rooms along that hallway between the Chapel and the Spitzer building? You might turn to p. 28 to see what we're planning for that part, but I'll cut to the chase. That building is crumbling. If tomorrow we called off this whole thing, then we are in a mess of trouble with that part of the building in particular. There's one part of the wall in the Parlor that I think we've patched due to water damage three times just in the five years I've been here. We can't find a leak coming down from above. We've rerouted the drainage away from it, but still water is finding its way into that wall and others in that building, and at some point we have to do something more than a patch job.

So while we're fixing that part of the building, we're also going to repurpose it for a more strategic purpose. A new small community space on one side of the hallway, and then an enlarged mid-sized fellowship hall on the other.

Ultimately, though, I keep coming back to what Cammy said: "God's in the business of restoring lives." And whether we're talking about a more hospitable, more accessible building, one that's more open and intuitive for a guest, so that they don't feel, like Laura Simmons put it, "like you didn't get the memo," or whether we're talking about restoring parts of the building, or whether we're talking about our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree, the primary purpose is not for the benefit of the people already here. That'll be a secondary benefit, to be sure. There is satisfaction to be had in an updated facility, but it's not for us.

But you know something? I bet along the way, we may find something being restored within ourselves too. God could be doing a mighty work through this, and it has nothing to do with bricks and mortar.

What did James say, all those years ago, citing the prophet? "[The Lord said] I will rebuild the dwelling of David," "I will restore the tent." And to what end, "so that all other people may seek the Lord."

Friends, please no more patch jobs. God is in the restoration business. Let's be in the restoration business too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.