

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Reach: Those Who Aren’t Here Yet”

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Acts 15:1-11

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Today as we begin this journey, this REACH series, we will be dropping into a crucial sequence in the early church’s history, one that I think should be considered in the same vein as Pentecost or the conversion of Saul. And it’s all about the challenge of the church to be about those whom God would be calling into the church to come.

I’ll actually start a couple of verses early toward the end of chapter 14. Let’s go to God’s Word together, **Acts 15:1-11**:

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: “Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone’s joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, “The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.”

So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: “Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Spirit of God, we pray for your leading this morning. We pray that your testimony of the blessing of faith to those the church may not expect would extend to us now, and that you would lead us to embrace it. Speak anew,

we pray, through your Word to us, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The number one most controversial thing to challenge the first generation of the church wasn't what we would imagine. Wasn't the Trinity, wasn't the dual nature of Jesus, wasn't predestination, wasn't the sacraments.

The first was what convened the assembly here in Acts 15, known as the Council of Jerusalem. The question was, should Gentile converts, male Gentile converts really, be required to be circumcised. Now that may seem a bit technical, but a better way to think about it may be this: "Just how Jewish was this new Christian thing supposed to be?"

Here's how it came about. Paul and Barnabas, two early apostles, were on a missionary journey in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, and at the end of it, they came to the city of Antioch, reporting "how [God] had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles."

This was a big deal, a bigger deal than we might realize, but it was something brewing for a while. From the very get go, Christ had commissioned to bring the gospel, to make disciples of all nations, but it was an assumption for some that becoming a disciple of the Messiah meant becoming a part of the covenant people of the Messiah, that is, the Jewish people.

Now they knew something was different. The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit was coming upon these disciples in powerful, tangible ways. That was new. That's what happened at Pentecost and afterward. But early on, it was almost strictly among Jewish followers of Jesus.

But then a funny thing started happening. The Holy Spirit would come upon non-Jews, upon Gentiles. And it was happening more and more, until Paul and Barnabas reported in Antioch that God "had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles."

And at that point—and this is where chapter fifteen picks up—some came saying "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Now that sounds harsh, but it's not so unreasonable, because up till then, to be a part of God's covenant people, the people of Israel, for males at least, it meant that you were circumcised.

But it also presented a pretty big problem, because now God was showing a clear embrace and empowerment by the Holy Spirit among peoples outside of the Jewish people, that is, from among the vast, vast majority of the human population.

So the question came to the church, and that's what convened this great Council of Jerusalem: what would have the bigger claim upon the shared life, the shared faith of this community. Would it be the law, the Mosaic law, Jewish identity? Or would it be the expansion and inclusion in the church of Christ of the countless others who weren't there yet? As Peter put it at the end of the passage, "Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the

neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have 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.”

Now up to the last verse we read, v. 11, the decision hasn't been made—even if you don't know the story, you can already guess the decision that was made. But the question I have for you today is, what would have happened if the church had said, you know, we are going to place this burden upon those who aren't here yet, rather than open a door of faith for them?

A lot has happened in the church since the Council of Jerusalem, not all of it good certainly. But along the way, over and over again the church has been faced with the same challenge: would it open a door of faith toward those who weren't there yet?

Over two hundred thirty years ago, a man named James White, a devout Presbyterian, ventured out into the frontier west of North Carolina, eventually founding the city of Knoxville. A lot more could be said about his life, but among his legacies was telling his son-in-law, who was mapping out the future town, to reserve his turnip patch for a church. That became the site of the first church in our city, First Presbyterian, right downtown, right where it is now.

A lot happened with First Presbyterian since then, but seventy-seven years ago, that church sensed a call to plant a church on what was then the growing edge of the city, a new neighborhood to the west called Sequoyah Hills. And so began Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church.

A whole lot could be said about the last seventy-seven years, but by the grace of God this congregation has grown, the building expanded, its impact deepening within our city.

Here's the reason for that quick history lesson. At any one of those points, those folks could have said, “You know, I'm going to focus on what I need, on what I want.” James White could have said, “You know, I rather like my turnip path. I'll keep it.” Or First Presbyterian could have said, “You know, we're going to focus on serving the church that we are now.” Or past saints of Sequoyah Hills Pres could have said, “I think we're fine as is.” What would have happened if they did? That's not rhetorical. I want us to think about that. That's one of the questions Pastor Mark asks in the study for this week.

But instead, at each point, when they met the same kind of decision that faced that Council of Jerusalem centuries ago, they said, “No. We are going to open a door of faith for those who aren't here yet.”

We have the same chance, friends.

Among the words that you will hear me raise again and again through this journey are “connection,” “fellowship,” “accessibility,” “hospitality.” These have been some of the principles that have guided the development of this whole project.

First and foremost, it's a spiritual matter. That drive to follow God's lead to open a door of faith to those who aren't here yet? That's hospitality, that's accessibility, that's fellowship in Christ. As you read through this campaign book, you'll see this. You know what hospitality is? It's placing a higher value upon the welcome of a guest than upon one's own comfort.

And I have felt that personally in our church, and I know many of you have too. Among the powerful ways we seek to live out the grace of Christ is the eager embrace and welcome of those who aren't a part of Christ's church yet.

A little while ago I was meeting with another pastor in the area. She knows our church; she's been in our church; and the nature of her ministry entails that she's in a large number of churches regularly. As we were talking, I shared about the plans for this campaign. She told me "Gosh is that needed. That is the least accessible, least hospitable church building I have ever seen."

Did that sting for anyone? It stung for me. I was like, "Whoa, that's a bit harsh." I even debated whether to tell y'all that little sound bite because, yeah, it stings. But ultimately we need to hear that sort of thing, because too often we can get used to things the way they are and not see them through the eyes of someone who isn't here yet but may be here one day.

But understand what she said. "The least accessible, least hospitable church *building*" she had ever seen. It wasn't a knock on the people. She even said that. You've got great folks there. *We* are a hospitable church. Our building is not.

Case in point, and this is just a small example. There are five levels, different elevations that are used as a major point of entry into the building. Ten points if you can name all of them. Five floor levels. And none of them are connected to any of the others in a way that someone with a walker, stroller, or wheelchair can use.

I mean we have a room that we call the Ramp Room, a room named for its accessibility to all mobility levels. And if you used a walker, stroller, or a wheelchair, and used said ramp, you would be able to go to the Chapel, which is wonderful. But then where else could you go? Nowhere. Back out the door you came in.

The point is, our building doesn't reflect the heart of who we are, of the church I know us to be, of the church that we know we have been called to be. One that opens both a spiritual and literal door of faith to those who aren't here yet. But it could.

Over these next few weeks, we'll look at various aspects of the plans for the building as well as our focus in mission with Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. The scope of the campaign is less about a big expansion of the church's footprint; that's not what's needed. But rather it's

about repurposing, restoring, and connecting what we have in a more hospitable way, a way that reflects our commitment to reach out and welcome in those who aren't here yet.

And today I want to share with you the why of what is perhaps the most visibly noticeable aspect of this campaign, and it's the enclosed connecting space alongside the sanctuary. You can see it on page 26 of your Reach Campaign book.

Now, we didn't go into this process thinking, "You know what we need? A glass-enclosed connecting space alongside the sanctuary." We went into it thinking, we have to connect this side of the building with the other side of the building in a way that is accessible to all and doesn't make the sanctuary double as a hallway.

First we looked at something along the backside of the sanctuary, but we couldn't do that because there's no room. That meant putting it on the front side, but then it's not just a passageway. It's the façade of the church. It's what it looks like from the street.

That's when thoughts of lots of glass, letting light in, letting light still come in through the stained-glass windows. That space will serve a necessary functional purpose, yes, connecting the building, but it will more importantly serve a spiritual purpose, a place of connection, sending a signal of hospitality, a place where a door of faith is opened to those who aren't here yet.

The apostles saw a door of faith opened by God, and they sought to do the same. But I invite you to imagine, what would have happened if they didn't?

Imagine the impact 230 years ago of James White giving up his land, his assets, for the sake of establishing a church in this new city?

Imagine the impact seventy-seven years ago of First Presbyterian not saying, "We just need to focus on the church we are now."

Imagine the impact throughout the decades of our church's history, the saints before us not saying, "You know, things are fine as they are."

Think about the steps of faith that they took for Christ, for his kingdom, for reaching out, for connecting, and think about the impact that was made because they didn't just stop with who they were, where they were, with how things were at the time, because the ones they had in mind were the countless others who weren't there yet.

And now think about what could happen if we do the same.

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