

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Move the Party Line”
Psalm 148:1-14
Acts 11:1-18**

**Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 19, 2019**

Psalm 148:1-14

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord! For he commanded and they were created. And he established them forever and ever; he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away. Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word!

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, old men and children! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the Lord!

Introduction

The last time we were in Acts, we looked at the story of Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus. If you recall, the opening word to chapter nine could be translated as "meanwhile." Well, that same conjunction is found later in verse thirty-two, when Peter's storyline is reintroduced. Luke is bringing into parallel the actions of the church's two most prolific apostles. After introducing Saul and his conversion, Luke wants us to return to Peter, for God has something big planned for him. Our passage this morning is Peter's retelling of the events in the previous chapter. So I invite you now to listen to the good news of Christ as it is recorded in Acts 11:1-18.

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." But Peter began and explained it to them in order: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

“Move the Party Line”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We know this event is extremely important because Luke takes the time to repeat, in detail, what was just spoken of in chapter ten. This is the culmination of Christ's promise in Acts 1:8 where he promises his disciples that they will be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the end of the earth*,” which is where the Gentiles live. That's been God's plan all along. If anything, there will always be people who can't grasp the fullness of God's plan. Luke tells us that shortly after Peter witnessed in Cornelius' house, the news spread to the brothers in Jerusalem. The distance between Jerusalem and Caesarea, where Cornelius lived, is about 60 miles. It's funny sometimes how fast gossip spreads. Someone probably traveled all night just to gossip about Peter before the elders the next morning. If we put as much effort into the witness and service of Christ as we put into tweets, gossip, and memes, the whole world could be converted in a matter of days! Instead, we often find ourselves in the position of the Circumcision Party.

I want to start by saying these folks are not the bad guys. They are not Pharisees. They are not hostile to Christ. These are folks who are reserved when it comes to the matters of doctrine and faith. I'm going to use this word, but do not think of it with it's 21st century connotations. The Circumcision Party are the conservative voices in church leadership. When I say conservative, I mean they are reserved in ideology, orthodox in practice, and prudent in doctrine. This is not a political party but a philosophical party. For instance, earlier, in the eighth chapter of Acts, after Philip “preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” to citizens in Samaria, the conservative voices in Jerusalem, again through the grapevine, found out and sent Peter and John. They needed to send in the big guns to make sure Philip wasn't doing anything that crossed the line, which in this case was welcoming the Samaritans into the fold. And indeed, in that case, the reaction was appropriate, for Peter and John were able to pray for Philip and his compatriots to receive the Holy Spirit.

Here we are again, only this time it's Peter, the top dog, Jesus' number one Disciple, he is now standing before the elders of the church. Verse two says the Circumcision Party “criticized” or “contended” with Peter. The Greek word has with it a sense of separation. This contention was more than just a mere difference of opinion. It's one thing to welcome Samaritans, because they are somewhat Jewish, even if they are not descendants of Judah. Their ancestors may have erred, but they still know the Scriptures. But Gentiles. They not only aren't Jewish, they weren't ever part of the historic covenant. It's one thing to convert the Ethiopian eunuch or Simon the magician or even Cornelius as an individual, because these folks at least had a rudimentary understanding of the law. But to baptize Cornelius' entire household, that was a step too far!

The Circumcision Party was very much aware of the Bible. They knew its words. They knew God's commands therein. They weren't biblically illiterate. Quite the opposite, these are biblical intellectuals. They are the Presbyterians of the early church. They knew that God's law

prevented the association of Jews with uncircumcised persons. That's their bone of contention with Peter. It's not that the Gentiles accepted Christ. The Circumcision Party was probably elated that Christ's words were coming true. Only, their vision was that the Gentiles would conform to the law. Because, again, they know the law, they know the Scriptures. And so they say to Peter, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them. You know better than that! You know God's commands! You know no uncircumcised person can share in the Passover feast, let alone the covenant promises of the God of the Passover!" And so they contended with Peter. They had an intense quarrel, full of emotion, passion, and zeal.

The Circumcision Party had a hard time reconciling on the one hand Jesus' promise to spread the Gospel even unto the Gentiles, and on the other hand God's promises preserved through the Mosaic law. Apart from a direct revelation from God, the only way they could perceive moving forward was for the Gentiles to be circumcised. Again, that makes sense, right? God has written out in the Old Testament what his plans are. There's no indication that his prescription should be reconsidered or amended. Up to this point, the elders in Jerusalem know nothing about Peter's vision. For all they know, he's gone rogue in an effort to win souls. In their minds, things need to be done decently and in order.

At our Session retreat last weekend, we learned some things about who we are as a congregation. We learned that your most recent interim process was a failure. We are far enough beyond that now that there's no point in assigning blame. Things happened and we are where we are by God's grace. More importantly, we must trust in him to help us. The early church used the image of a sail boat at full mast to describe the church. I love that image. It shows direction, movement, energy. Right now, we are not at the fullness of that image. APC is currently a ship at sea without her sails and, for a long time, without a rudder. We have a rudder. I plan on being here for several years and we have a good Session. Now, we just need sails. The sails are what capture God's wind, God's Spirit, and gives us the energy to move forward. There's only one thing that is standing in our way. Each of us, at some point or another and to one degree or another is in the mindset of the Circumcision Party.

We know the traditions. We have the experience of our past. In our minds is the height of the 1960s. But we're no longer in the 1960s. For good or ill, time moves on. Nevertheless, God's plan continues to work itself out. That was the meta-issue for the Circumcision Party. At first report, they were unwilling to believe that God's plan would mean full and unfettered admission to the Gentiles. They assumed the Gentiles would have to work, at least a little bit, toward their salvation. The problem was, in God's eyes, circumcision was a non-issue, but they couldn't see the world through God's eyes. How is God's plan working itself out before our eyes? What is God doing in and around our community? I see a people hungering for purpose, for direction, for God. How are we part of that plan? Are we on the cutting edge or are we limping behind? In what ways can we spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those around us? Christ charged the whole church to go and make disciples. We have a theological system that is unique and deeply biblical in this endeavor. What is it that makes our Reformed expression of Christianity stand out in this market oversaturated with Baptist? why even have a Presbyterian church?

In order to provide for this community, we need to figure some things out. The Circumcision Party had a tangle on one issue. I imagine it was hard for them to let it go, and I know there were some who never came to terms with uncircumcised Christians. Over the next couple years, we're going to take a long journey to learn what is our "circumcision" hold up. My hope is that we'll find an answer to what is slowing our sharing of the Gospel. We need to take a long and detailed look at ourselves and how God is transforming our church to reach *His* goal. Notice I said "His" goal. Our goal might be to spend more on missions. Our goal might be to see more people in the pews. Our goal might be to have more kids. Are those necessarily *God's* goals? The last I checked, God's goal is to bring the Gospel even unto the Gentiles. In order to reach the, quote, "Gentiles" around us, we need, first, to figure out what we believe and how to share it with them.

There are things that we should never give up or never conceded. There are doctrines of faith that we cannot change, amend, or ignore. But there are things we *need* to concede. There are things that should be transformed for the glory of God's name. My question for you, church, and for our Session is, what needs transforming? What cornerstones of our faith need preserving and what can we reform in order to better align with God's unstoppable advancement of the Gospel? And God's plan is unstoppable. So, either we get on board with his vision and hold on tight to his transformation, or we miss the boat and find ourselves seeking after our own plans. Indeed, perhaps Peter's own words should be on our lips: "who am I that I could stand in God's way?" He is ready to transform us. Are we ready to be transformed?

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we know that you opened the eyes of the Circumcision Party to the reality that adoption and regeneration are not brought on by outward signs but by your inward call. You opened their hearts to welcome the Gentile as a believer based not on ritual practices, but on your gracious will. My prayer is that our eyes and hearts may be opened, as well. Open our eyes to see the ways you are moving around us. Open our hearts to welcome your transformation in thought and in action. Remind us, O Lord, that if we fail to recognize your work, we will fail your commission and fade away into history. None of us wants that. Transform us, your church and your session, to respond to your Gospel call. In the name of our Savior, the Good News himself, our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.