

June 21, 2020 | Sanctuary and Journey worship services

TEXT: [Acts 15:1–11](#)

TITLE: Ever-Expanding Stories of Faith

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

“Tell me a story.” In our house, that request can go in lots of directions. Maybe it leads to a story about when our children were young, or how Beth and I met, or the day we chose to get a dog from the shelter. Maybe it’s a story about our old house in Wisconsin, or a story about Grammy and Poppa Dick, my parents who have been dead now for almost a decade. Stories ground us. They remind us where we’ve come from and who we are. That can be a very good thing. But sometimes the stories we tell aren’t enough; they need to be stretched, expanded, so all that has to be said can finally be acknowledged and remembered and believed.

Here we are more than three months into a difficult season of national shutdown and pandemic precautions, and almost one month since the tragic murder of George Floyd by a white police officer has provoked protests, marches, and a reexamination of what it means to be white or a person of color in America. The stories we’ve told of late have not been easy ones; no soothing anecdotes of days gone by. They have often been stories of conflict, of wrong choices made in the past, and lessons about racism and justice still needing to be learned today.

Almost 2000 years ago, the followers of Jesus Christ faced a major crisis. Within a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the church consisted of both Jews and non-Jews—Greeks, Gentiles, people who had not been raised with the laws of Moses but who had come to believe that Christ was the Son of God. One day Paul was in the city of Antioch, sharing the gospel of Christ, when he was criticized by some who believed that to be saved, to be fully welcomed into the realm of God, you had to be circumcised. These critics were Jewish-Christians. Their faith story went back to Abraham, Moses and the Ten Commandments, and a covenant between God and humanity that one entered specifically through the act of male circumcision. So how could Gentiles in Antioch be part of God’s covenant unless they too received circumcision as the rite of entry into the family of God? Paul and Barnabas argued with these critics, but to no avail. It was decided that a group should go to Jerusalem and speak with the apostles—with Peter, James and the others—and see what they would say about this. And so off they went.

I chose this scripture for today because there are lots of parallels between the argument in Antioch and the arguments in America today. Over the years, there have been lots of stories we’ve told ourselves as a nation that have inspired and comforted us. But sometimes our stories have been wrong or incomplete. Different stories now are being lifted up—stories that challenge many things we’ve taken for granted and they put a stark choice before us: Do we hold on to something false yet familiar, or will we step forward into something true yet uncomfortable, even disruptive in the changes it will require of us all?

I recently sat with a young African American mother, and fairly quickly into our conversation, she teared up and named how difficult the past days had been for her. I

knew she hadn't been able to work since March and commented to her how hard this whole coronavirus pandemic has been. She nodded a bit, but went on to say that the hardness for her has been the death of George Floyd—proving that lynching was truly possible in this day and age, and how she worries all the time for her teenage son. I was sad and ashamed of myself for missing something so obvious. I'd offered the general story about Covid; but she named the real, personal story of racism in her life. Until I shut-up and allowed space for her to tell that story, we couldn't have a real conversation together. So I listened and let her speak so that I might learn and hopefully we could find an authentic story for both our lives in this difficult moment in time.

The city of Antioch was in Syria on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Paul and Barnabas made their way to Jerusalem by going down through regions populated by people who were not part of the Jewish community: Phoenicians and Samaritans. But that didn't stop them from preaching about Jesus Christ, the Savior who died and rose again, who calls us to new lives of justice, faith and righteousness. Their preaching was built upon Jewish traditions of the rescue from Egypt, the psalms of David, and the moral teachings of the prophets. But this story was necessarily expanded when it was shared with the Gentiles and all received it with great joy. When Paul and Barnabas reached Jerusalem, there was no denying that God was working through them and the gospel of Christ was good news for Jew and Gentile alike. But there was still disagreement about what story should be told: a Jewish-centered covenant story focused on circumcision or a Gentile-centered salvation story focused on God's inclusive grace.

We don't talk much about Bacon's Rebellion when we discuss American history, but we should. Nathaniel Bacon was a wealthy, white property owner who lived in Virginia in the 1670s. He wanted to remove all Native Americans from the colony so that landowners like himself could expand their property. He organized a militia made up of both white and black indentured servants as well as African American slaves. They rioted against the governor and even burnt down the regional capital of Jamestown. Bacon died of a fever a month later and his rebellion fell apart, but those in power were alarmed that a multiracial militia had threatened the halls of power in Virginia. So the politicians shifted their plans. Rather than fight the militias, they began to make legal distinctions between "white" and "black" inhabitants, permanently enslaving Virginians of African descent while giving poor, white, indentured servants new rights and status. By separating the groups, they divided and conquered. Suddenly absolute power was given to the white slave-owner. The story of racism became the American story.

Today we still struggle with how to articulate the story of race and racism. We sometimes use the vocabulary of white privilege and white supremacy, but even those words are flawed and incomplete. Clinical therapist Resmaa Menahem has insisted that when white people talk about white privilege, it can sound like a problem only some spoiled rich people have, like the Hollywood stars who tried to buy college admission for their kids. Or when we say white supremacy, it sounds like something we associate with white-robed bigots and not something any of us would profess. But Menahem insists we need to add one word to those phrases—that we talk about "white body privilege" and "white body supremacy." Once the focus shifts from concepts to bodies, from slogans to lives lived, it becomes personal. Now the line connecting the Virginia race laws of the

1670s and the structures of racism in the 2020s can be clearly seen, for it travels through white bodies. And once it's seen, the stories we tell about ourselves have to change.

When Paul and Barnabas told their story in Jerusalem, a decision had to be made. Were Christians simply converts into the existing Jewish faith or were they something else? On that day, by the grace of God, the story of faith forever expanded. No longer was being a child of Abraham a mark of salvation nor was circumcision the required ritual of entry into the covenant of God's love. Both Jew and Greek needed to step into a different, more expansive story. Baptism would be its ritual of entry; faith in a risen, living Christ would be its guiding principle; and fellowship in a community in which there was no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free would be, to borrow a phrase from both Lin-Manuel Miranda and John Bolton "the room where it happened."

This expanded story of faith worked so well because it was built on the example of the life of Jesus Christ. When Jesus healed the lepers and had a meal with the tax collectors, he re-wrote the stories about who they were and expanded the faith narrative so that they may take their rightful place as participants in the realm of God. Peter learned this truth when he saw the vision of the large sheet containing all manner of animal, and heard the Lord tell him, "What I have called clean you must not call unclean." Paul knew this truth, when he, the former Pharisee and militant law enforcer, became an evangelist to the Gentiles, witnessing to the transforming, expansive power of God at work in their lives.

Amid the consternation of the present season, many of you are asking "What should I do? How do I move beyond protests and reading another anti-racism book to meaningful change?" Part of what we all can do is be better storytellers. We can't talk about Christopher Columbus without naming the violence he unleashed on the Caribbean peoples. We can't tell Thomas Jefferson's story without naming the reality of Sally Hemings being his enslaved concubine. We can't tell of Lewis & Clark's western expansion from Pittsburgh without the parallel tales of exploiting, murdering, and pillaging land from the Native Americans. We can no longer pretend that things are just and fair in America, when race continues to be the biggest indicator of whether you live near a toxic site, breathe dirty air, drink dirty water, lack educational resources or struggle with food insecurity. Faith in Christ calls us to tell a story better than that and bigger than how it's been told up until now.

Friends, this is not something to be feared, for it is ultimately the way the story is supposed to be told. We step away from narrow prejudices and protected privilege and move toward a wider horizon—of the common good, of justice and righteousness, of God's saving grace and the great joy that comes in the morning. Be not afraid. Holy Spirit, open our hearts to this full story of faith, and in so doing, set us free at last.

Amen.