

**SERMON**  
**“Imagine That”**  
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**May 2, 2010**  
**Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
*Communion Sunday*  
**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

**Acts 15: 1-2, 22-29**

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

<sup>22</sup> Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to chose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

**Revelation 21: 1-2, 22-24**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its

lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

### **John 13: 31-35**

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

## **SERMON**

This scripture lesson from Acts and Revelation lifts up two images for us to consider this morning. The real life picture of a church in conflict comes to us from the Acts of the Apostles. The other image is a vision that lived in the head of John, the author of Revelations. This very positive, idealized vision of the new Jerusalem empowered John to survive the horrors of his exile to the island of Patmos. John’s body may have moved in the chains of forced labor, but in his mind, he lived in the reign of God’s glory—a place bathed in light, and a place without a temple.

The imagery of Revelations often seems a little strange and bazaar to us. Yet surely we can identify with his longing for a new residence of glory. Still, if we were to imagine the perfect city, the perfect world, would we image one without a church? Let’s say you had a new job offer in another city. You go there to see if this is a place you would like to live. Once there, you discover this city has no churches. What would be your impression of this place? Would you want to live there? I know I would not for obvious reasons. You would think that John, whom we know to have been the pastor of at least seven churches in Asia, would have had similar concerns.

So what are we to make of this dream city without a temple, and what are we to do with it in reference to the other image of a church in conflict?

Dan Davis, a conflict workshop leader, says we move through stages when we are in conflict. In stage one and two of conflict, the problem is clearly identified. Then by the time conflict gets to stage four, everyone loses sight of the problem—and the community in conflict is in big time trouble. Instead of trying to solve the problem, they start attacking each other.

In order to never arrive at stage four of conflict, Dan says every community must look deep down into their fears and anxieties and hang in there with honesty and candor. Conflict and disagreement are not bad things. Actually, they are downright healthy!

Roy Oswald explains it well in *Running Through the Thistle*. “It’s impossible to stuff powerful feelings down inside, paint a smile on our face, and come out the other side feeling whole or good about ourselves. Repressed emotions will emerge somehow—in unexpected ways that make us more like victims than actors in life.”

Like the church in Antioch, we are a church in conflict. The problem to address is not circumcision, thank goodness. I’m certainly glad they got that one settled. But there is a certain similarity in that some wanted to follow the old ways, and others could not move fast enough into the new Jerusalem.

“Certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching, “Unless you are circumcised according to the customs of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them. (Acts 15: 1-2a)

Unable to resolve the matter among themselves, they sent a delegation to Jerusalem to hold a general synod of sorts. There, at the first conference of Jerusalem, one group says, “It’s clear; we simply have to keep the laws of Moses.” Peter says, “Why are we putting on the neck

of the disciples, a yoke (the volumes of laws) that neither we nor our ancestors 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.”

After Peter spoke, Paul and Barnabas get up and tell of the signs and wonders that God has performed through them among the Gentiles. Then after they’d finished James says, “Now, listen to me. I agree with Paul and Barnabas. God has looked favorably upon the Gentiles. We shouldn’t trouble these people who are turning to God, insisting they have to be circumcised, but, we should have them observe our food regulations.” Now personally, I would have preferred Peter’s solution—that we accept them just as they are—seems more like Jesus to me. But that was not the one with which they went. They went with James’ solution, which was indeed a good compromise position. Paul and Barnabas get what they want. The Gentiles are not going to be required to be circumcised. And the law abiding group, that feels we must keep the laws of Moses, gets some restrictions imposed upon those Gentiles.

A letter stating James’ position is sent off to the Gentile believers and the matter is closed. Well, it is closed until you read I Corinthians 8 and 9. There we discover that with one problem resolved, another surfaces. Now the debate focuses in on the food regulations. Throughout the history of the church, conflict repeats itself again and again. The inevitability of conflict exists when people come together to share a common life.

How the conflict is handled determines the ongoing health of the community. The early church seemed to know this. They were not frightened by disagreement. But we are. It scares us out of our wits. We’d rather sweep it under the carpet and ignore it. We’d rather play like there is no elephant in the living room instead of trying to figure how to get him out. We would rather paint a smile on our face and pretend everything is just fine, than face it head on.

Why does honest, direct dialogue with each other scare us so? I think it has something to do with an age-old fear (taught to us) that conflict at any level is destructive, maybe even evil. Look at the reason the Pharisees and the scribes were so intent on doing away with Jesus. Jesus was going and saying all these controversial things. He was healing people on the Sabbath. He was recognizing and bringing into his fold people who they thought were unclean. He was stirring up the people when they had had everything tacked down so neatly.

Structures that we invest a lot of ourselves in, have a way of eventually doing us in. You do enough living in a building or a house and the inanimate object seems to take on a life of more importance than the people it was erected to serve.

I remember the day so clearly. The day the movers came, leaving our house, once our home...so...empty. My daughters and I lingered there in the emptiness and heard the echoes that seemed to live in that encased space. We sat down in the middle of the family room on the floor and cried. The house seemed to take life. All the birthday parties, the Christmas Eve celebrations, the excitement over good report cards, the long talks, and the love and disappointments shared...all seemed to still live there. How could we walk away?

This also happens to a church. For many of you, a lifetime of memories lives in this space. Many of you grew up in this church. Your children were baptized here, confirmed and married in this space. You have faced the death of your parents, brothers and sisters, your husbands and wives, in this sanctuary. This has become for you, hallowed ground.

And you know what? I do not think you have to worry about walking away because two weeks ago, you got together at five Town Hall meetings and talked to each other. We may well be approaching our final days of stuffing it. For a group of gentle folk who do not want to do anything to hurt someone else's feelings, that's coming a far piece.

We will arrive when we realize that a building and customs are never more important than the well-being of the people they was erected to serve. As John points out— in the New Jerusalem a temple is not even required. “For its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.” (Revelation 21: 22b)

When we stop making decisions based on fear, and live in the glory of God’s presence, great things will come of our common ministry. When we always take into consideration the most loving thing we can do for each other, when we consider what it means to love as Jesus loved us, we will forever more honestly talk to each other...rather than about each other. Imagine that!