## Sunday, July 27, 2014 “We Have Been at This Moment Before”

## Sermon Preached by Rev. James Brassard

## At Christian Community Presbyterian Church, Bowie, Maryland

## SCRIPTURE - Acts 15:1-32 “The Council at Jerusalem”

Let us listen for the word of the Lord:

*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. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”*

*The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. 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.” 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 fornication 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.”*

*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 choose 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.” So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers.*

The Word of the Lord

**The church has been at this moment before! Many times.**

The scenario is the same: A controversy has been brewingfor many years and it had reached a tipping point. It was time to decide what kind of a body the church was going to be going forward.And so—the leadership gathered ---some undoubtedly reluctantly—to make a decision.

The first great church gathering is known as the **Council in Jerusalem.**

The year is about 48 AD: less than 20 years since the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. Already, mostly due to the inspired preaching and organizational genius of the Apostle Paul---known as the Apostle to the Gentiles--the church is growing rapidly in the outer regions of the Roman Empire. The Holy Spirit is changing lives and transforming communities.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem the mother church, headed by Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, is worried about this explosive growth in the non-Jewish membership. They are very concerned that the church might be losing its Jewish roots. They believed that adherence to the Mosaic Law and the traditions and practices observed since the Exodus are what held the people of Israel (and now the church) together. They feared that if the new Gentile converts failed to follow the Mosaic Law the church will lose its uniqueness and shatter its unity.

Some among the Jewish followers of Jesus began insisting that all new converts, who were not Jews, had to first observe all the Jewish cultural rites and practices. There were dietary restrictions to observe (you had to become vegetarian), and numerous ceremonial rules related to ritual cleanliness that had to be followed.

Some, the radical literalists (here called the Pharisee party), went so far as to insist that adult men had to obey the Mosaic custom of [circumcision](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/118439/circumcision).

To the Gentiles and their leader, the Apostle Paul, this was a deal breaker.

He could understand the need to make some compromises in the name of unity, but now the knives were out. They knew they were not wanted.

So a delegation, led by the apostle [Paul](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/447019/Saint-Paul-the-Apostle) and his companion Barnabas, was appointed to confer with the elders of the church in Jerusalem. The Apostolic Conference, which is described in the Acts 15 passage we just read, decided the issue in favor of Paul and the Gentile Christians. From this time onward Gentile Christians were not bound by the Levitical ceremonial regulations of the Jews, except for the provisions of the so-called apostolic decree: they must abstain from eating meats that had been sacrificed to idols.

The Council of Jerusalem thus demonstrated the willingness of apostolic leaders to **make compromises** on **certain secondary issues** in order to maintain peace and unity in the church.

It is instructive to notice how they arrived at the decision to include Gentiles.

They did three things. **First, they consulted the scriptures**. At the time there were only the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). If you have ever been with preachers and rabbis you know that interpretation of scripture varies widely. Each preacher considers some biblical lessons more important than others. Supporters of full inclusion probably spoke about God’s promise to Jacob—“I will make you a light to the nations.” They probably backed this assertion by extolling the rich tradition of hospitality to strangers. I can imagine others quoting the wonderful words of Ruth and Naomi—“Your God will be my God and my people will be your people.”

 Those opposing inclusion would quote texts warning against taking non-Hebrew wives. They would argue that what gave the people of Israel its distinctiveness was their strict observance of the law. Others would call upon upholding “tradition.”

In rebuttal I am sure it was pointed out that even Jesus had trouble with sticklers for the law—the Pharisees. Remember those battles over healing on the Sabbath? Jesus didn’t require strict adherence to law---he just said “follow me.”

**Secondly, they** **shared their experiences**. In this case their experiences with Gentile Christians. They testified to their character. They shared stories of a willingness to sacrifice even their lives to witness to Jesus Christ. Gentile men and women from all walks of life were serving Christ and God was granting a dramatic increase. Yes, they witnessed, the Holy Spirit is alive and well among the Gentiles.

Jesus said, “The harvest is large and the harvesters are few.” Here are faithful witnesses producing an abundant harvest of Christ-like believers. Who can be opposed to Gentiles in the church?

**And finally**--after hearing from James and Peter, who gave their support--**they voted**.

The vote apparently was not a straight up and down. There is evidence that in order to reach consensus, some compromises on diet were attached to the agreement. The Apostle Paul, whose side won the debate, later had to justify to his followers these concessions. “If my brother is weak, and this would cause him to stumble.” In other word, why not make compromises for the sake of unity.

Not surprisingly, having won full rights for Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas left in high hopes. They went back to report that our brothers and sister in Jerusalem—including the great Apostle Peter, and Jesus’ brother, James accepted the Gentile Christians as full members of the body of Christ.

**But,** as often happens when one homogeneous group is asked to include a race or group they don’t consider equal or worthy, some church groups gave lip service to an equality that was not observed in practice. There is little evidence that the church in Jerusalem ever had but token Gentile representation. **They agreed**—how could they not, given Peter’s endorsement. **But** **they** **never went along**.

We know this because in Paul’s letter to the church in Galatians, written a few years later, Peter came as Paul’s guest to visit the church in Galatia. Imagine the excitement to have the one whom Jesus called “The Rock” come to visit them. Peter received a **hero’s welcome**. They worshipped together. Peter probably gave a powerful sermon and then, in the great symbol of unity, they all sat down for the potluck meal. Given the arguments over diet, you can be pretty sure what was on the table was as important as who was at the table.

It was a wonderful experience until some other members of the church in Jerusalem arrived. Then Peter, perhaps fearing a backlash at home, refused to eat with the Gentile believers. This unfortunate event triggered the great statement of Paul in Galatians 3: “In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female—we are all one in Christ.”

So the church limped along towards full inclusion of Gentiles. Acceptance was uneven in practice. We know that within another generation the followers of Jesus were over 90% Gentiles. The wisdom of the council of Jerusalem was affirmed. We are **here** today, because of that decision.

**The church has been at this moment before.**

In the 4th century the church leaders gathered at the Council of Nicaea to resolve a theological dispute over the humanity and divinity of Christ. In the early 1600s, after 30 bloody years of religious wars in England, church leaders met at Westminster Abbey to hammer out the Westminster Confession of Faith. This landmark agreement firmly established reformation principles and introduced our representative form of church government. This system of governance was transported to the American colonies by our Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.

**The church has been at this moment before.**

I was examined for ordination over 30 years ago. The examining body was Beaver- Butler Presbytery, located north of Pittsburgh. It was, and still is, a very traditional culture. Pennsylvania is sometimes referred as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh with Appalachia everywhere in between. I was from a progressive suburb of Portland, Oregon. Not only was I from the left coast, I was only 26 and looked 15…even with my mustache.

My statement of faith was very orthodox. John Calvin would have approved.

The Candidate’s Committee of 10 asked me several general questions about my statement and my experiences in ministry. Then, an elderly man spoke for the first and only time.

 “I have only one **question**: Will you ordain women to be elders and deacons?”

A little shocked by the question, I said, “Of course, why deprive the church of the leadership gifts and talents of 55% of its membership?”

I started to expand on my answer, probably to kill time, until he stopped me saying, “**I move to approve his ordination**.”

On the drive back to my hotel, I asked the chair of the Pulpit Committee, “**What was that about**?” This was a question I would ask over and over again during my five years in Slippery Rock. I was told that in the past few years the Presbytery had lost seven churches, along with the church property, over the requirements to ordain women as elders. To me this seemed crazy. General Assembly had voted to ordain Women as deacons in 1926, as elders in 1936 and as pastors in 1956. In 1983 churches were leaving because they had to share leadership with women?

If you drive by churches that say they are affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) or the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) these are denominations formed by those who left the denomination over women elders. These bodies still deny full rights to women

**The church has been at this moment before.**

During the last 30 years the church has debated the inclusion of homosexuals into church leadership. The change in attitudes towards homosexuals has been dramatic. Thirty years ago gay men and women mostly hid, or even denied their sexual orientation. Most lived in the closet in fear. The church was not welcoming.

That first November during my pastorate in Slippery Rock, the guest preacher invited by the Women’s Association for the annual missionary offering boldly said that AIDS was God’s judgment on homosexuals. Many in the congregation probably agreed with him. Two years later, the college held a memorial service for a young black student, who sang in my church choir, who died of AIDS. Change was coming.

For the last 20 years the church has formed study groups to examine the Bible’s statements on homosexuality. I printed the six texts in blue and they are inserted into the bulletin for your study. Some scholars are still adamantly opposed to ordination of homosexuals and some believe homosexuality to be a sinful condition that prohibits you from being saved.

We know that there was plenty of homosexual behavior in ancient times. But homosexuality as orientation, and homosexuals being in relationship, is a foreign concept to the biblical writers.

Over the past 20 years I have witnessed many highly respected Presbyterian scholars, who after years of study of these texts in the company of faithful gay Presbyterians, have had their minds changed and hearts opened. They support not only full inclusion of homosexuals into the church leadership; many strongly support same gender marriage.

Following one General Assembly meeting that wrestled with ordination, my New Jersey church Session insisted I preach a sermon on the topic. It was less than a year after my father had succumbed to cancer. In his last years, following his retirement, my dad had volunteered at an inpatient hospice that served men suffering from HIV/AIDS. When he first started to make the rounds offering communion to the Christians among the men, they refused his offer saying they had felt such hatred and condemnation from the church. My dad is a winsome guy and he humbly asked to hear their stories. Eventually they welcomed his prayers and the sacrament. Right before he died he said he had changed his mind. He believed that homosexuals should be afforded full rights and privileges of leadership in the church.

When I preached my sermon, I shared my father’s conversion and concluded by suggesting that if the Apostle Paul were to write his famous dictate today, he would say, “In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, no slave nor free, no male or female, **no gay nor straight**, we are one in Christ.”

Some thought the sermon was helpful. It opened a few minds and softened a few hearts. Others were furious. I was a little nervous when the following Wednesday I got a phone call from a man in the congregation who was known for his very dogmatic positions. He asked if Andrea and I would join him and his wife for dinner at the nearby French restaurant. I said, “Sure,” and steeled myself for a fierce and lengthy refutation of my sermon. I was pleased it was at a fancy restaurant. Good food and the setting would tone down his temper.

Lloyd told me that he had gone over 20 years without seeing or talking with his youngest son. The reason was that 20 years ago his son announced that he was gay and since that time had lived with his male partner. The two men were both distinguished professionals in Boston. His wife had accepted the news and faithfully visited their son and partner each summer and they talked weekly on the phone. Lloyd had, in self-righteous anger and perhaps shame, cut his son off from all contact.

He then said, “James, I have been so foolish and so mean. I have lost 20 years with my son that I cannot get back. Can I be forgiven?” I assured him that God forgives us and suggested that it is never too late to renew that relationship. The two men reconciled. Until Lloyd died five years ago, the two became close again.

How fast attitudes towards homosexuals have changed depends mostly on the exposure individuals have with gay and lesbian members of society. Our young people have witnessed the struggles and the hardship their peers have endured to accept and communicate to their families their sexual orientation. Homosexuals are now openly in the workforce. There is still a heavy price to pay for being openly gay (the Missouri linebacker who came out lost $3 million in his first NFL contract). But we are getting to the point that most people accept that homosexuals are, and always have been, a small segment of our human community.

It was raining in Venice, Italy on our trip so I stayed on the ship and read former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates’ book, “Duty.” He writes about the repeal of the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy. Under that policy, homosexual soldiers could serve in the military as long as they were not outed. At the hearings to change this policy, James Amos, head of the Marine Corps, testified that allowing openly gay soldiers to serve would undermine the discipline and spirit of the Corp.

Despite his testimony, Congress overturned the policy and Amos went along with the implementation. The military wrote policies and training procedures for the two million men and women in uniform. Not even a year later, Gates reviewed the effects of the change. He writes, “**We turned a page in history and there was hardly a ripple**.”

Presbyterians are unlike the military. We are not a top down hierarchy. We maintain the historic Presbyterian doctrine of freedom of conscience.

In their recent vote, the General Assembly was trying to allow Presbyterian pastors and congregations to follow their own biblically and theologically formed conscience for an issue for which there is presently no church-wide consensus.

Pastors whose conscience leads them to support gay marriage will be able to conduct ceremonies without fear of being prosecuted in church courts and the possibility of losing their ordination.

Those pastors opposed are free from any requirement to endorse or participate in ceremonies that their consciences disapprove.

**Just as in apostolic times—implementation of a degree will be unevenly observed.** Churches that welcome and have significant numbers of homosexual members will perform marriage ceremonies.

Places where some gay and lesbian members worship regularly but desire to keep their sexual orientation private will welcome them but probably not have any requests to perform same gender marriage ceremonies.

Other churches will have few, if any, homosexual members because they will know they are not welcome and will prefer to worship in places where their identify is affirmed.

Writing in a *Presbyterian Outlook* column, Rev. Heather Husted, who is against the change, warned that supporters should not assume that everyone who disagrees with same gender marriage is eitherhomophobic or exclusionary. She added that if you find yourself unhappy or angry—you are not alone. Presbyterians have always respected and honored the principle that people of good conscience can differ.

My prediction is that when I am older and grayer than I am now, I will look back at this turbulent time in our denominational and national life and marvel that only by the grace and mercy of God did we get through this.

Then something else will come up that will challenge the church’s beliefs and practices. Once again the changes will reach a tipping point. Presbyterians will gather at another General Assembly. We will study the relevant scriptures. We will share stories of God’s grace changing minds and converting hearts. And eventually we will start taking votes. If past practice holds, the decision will amount to baby steps, not bold action. Those that are on the losing side of votes will again be given the freedom of conscience as to how they will implement changes.

**We have been at this moment before**. Amen.