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Westminster Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 13, 2025

Unnecessary Burdens:

Our second scripture reading comes from the book of Acts 15: 3-12. You can follow along on page 899 of your pew bible. Listen now for a word from God.

³ 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 brothers and sisters. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers,^[a] 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. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹² 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.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When I was a junior in High School, my brother, my dad, and I went on a trip with our boy scout troop to the High Adventure Base, Northern tier. It was a week-long trip to the wilderness of Northern Minnesota, during which, we would camp each night, canoe over 100 miles, and carry everything we would need for the duration of the week with us. At the beginning of the trip, we were flown in propeller planes out to a remote point and would spend the week navigating and canoeing our way back to the base. In preparation for the trip, we had several “shakedown” trips

throughout the spring. Essentially, they were trial runs—we would pack our bags as if we were leaving for the trip, canoe several miles, practice cooking on the camp stoves we would be using, and most importantly, go through our bags to “shakedown” everything we wouldn’t need for the week. Since we were carrying everything that we would need with us, we wanted to reduce the amount of weight that we would be carrying by getting rid of everything that we didn’t absolutely need.

The title for today’s sermon is “Unnecessary Burdens,” because our text has to do with the shedding of undue weight. Our text begins with a gathering of elders and disciples in Jerusalem, who have set out to determine a course of action for welcoming new believers into the faith. In particular, they are discussing how the Gentiles who have been converted will come to practice the faith. Do they also have to become Jewish? Do they have to follow the Jewish traditions and customs. Must they adopt a Jewish identity, to follow Christ, and to be members of the body of Christ, the Church? These are the questions they have set out to answer.

These questions represent an underlying thread that runs throughout the book of Acts. As the Holy Spirit is moving, leading the disciples to spread the good news, breaking down boundaries that have long existed, and joining disparate communities, cultures, and identities together as one

body, the disciples must now discern how this new body will live out its faith. On the one side, those who maintain that those who desire to follow Jesus must convert, become circumcised, and follow Jewish practices and traditions. And on the other side, those who would allow new converts to practice their faith in whatever way was authentic to their own culture, their own identity and traditions.

It's important to note, that there are no gentile voices at this table. The council is being held in Jerusalem, where most Christians still identified as part of the Jewish faith, and so this conversation is happening about the gentiles, without their presence, or their participation. By the very nature of this council, a hierarchy is established, one by which one group is making decisions for and about another group. About their bodies, their identity, about how they will be instructed to practice their faith if they desire to follow Christ. The heart of this text is not about the validity of these Jewish customs, which are a deeply valued part of that tradition, both then and now. This text is about how we navigate difference in a world where the Holy Spirit is inspiring vibrant and new expressions of faith.

Barnabas and Paul return from Antioch and share the news of the church that has been established there, of the people whom they met, and of what God is doing in that community of faith. In response to hearing this

news, several members of the Pharisees, stand up to demand that these new believers be ordered to follow the law of Moses, to be circumcised, and to adopt a Jewish identity. Instead of receiving the news from Antioch with joy, with gratitude, and with wonder, for what God is doing, they immediately demand that these new believers be brought into conformity. We can see that this isn't a faithful sharing of their tradition. They have burdened their fellow Christians with their own discomfort and desire for control.

We are no strangers to this scene. We are familiar with the discomfort that change, and difference can stir up in us. We know well the desire to control, to conform, and to contain the Holy Spirit to something we can understand. The stubborn allure of control is that it doesn't require anything of us. If we remain in control, we don't have to risk being vulnerable. We don't have to open ourselves to be changed. We don't have to learn something new. And we don't have to trust in God.

But it heaps up a burden.

"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?" Peter asks. It's a zinger of a question and it silences the room. The

debate pauses as the elders listen to what Peter has to say. “Why have you placed this burden on us, which is too heavy to carry?” Peter knows that it is not those on this council who will bear the weight of their discomfort, their desire for control. It will be the Gentiles, those newest converts to the faith, those marked different by their culture, their traditions, and even their bodies who will bear the weight of this burden. And it will be the Holy Spirit, who will have to overcome the burdens with which we encumber one another. While we have faith that there is nothing God cannot overcome, we must always look to the ways we can join in the work that God is doing, not work against it. When we do not consider the weight of our actions, we test God.

“On the contrary,” Peter continues, “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Peter overturns the established hierarchy, whereby this council holds all the power, reminding them that it is not their role to make decisions on behalf of others, to force conformity, or even to be in control at all. Always, their role is to respond with gratitude and joy to the movement of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit has been revealed to the people in Antioch, has cleansed them, and has joined them to the Body of Christ. They are already one people, in all their differences.

To be united in Christ is to be reminded that we are responsible for one another. We are called to bear one another's loads, not to heap up burdens upon one another. And so, the question that our faith prompts us to ask, is "What can we put down?" What have we packed in our bags that will not serve the Body of Christ. What are we asking others to carry on our behalf?

Just like that boy scout trip, there will be things that we must carry with us. Our stove, our tents, our food, our clothes. We will be responsible for caring for one another—for joining in each other's sorrows, for uplifting one another in the midst of challenges, for holding hope for one another in the face of despair. These are the burdens which we join the Holy Spirit in carrying with one another. But perhaps we can set aside our own fear of uncertainty, our hunger for power over others, our allegiance to conformity, and our trust only in ourselves. These will only heap up a burden for someone else to bear.

The Holy Spirit is moving in wild and wonderful ways; ways that we cannot expect or control, ways that will lead us to people and to places that we never expected, and say to us, "you are responsible for one another." This is the gift of faith—that God is the one in control, God is the source of

our salvation, not us. What will you set down to answer the calling of the Spirit?

Thanks be to God. Amen.