

Roots

15 - Thou Shall Not Drift

If you're here this morning for the first time or if you haven't been in a while we're in the middle of a teaching series. This series is called "Roots" because we're exploring the beginning, the foundation, or roots of a movement we know of as Jesus' church. We've been doing that by studying the book of the Bible that unpacks the genesis of Jesus' church, the book of Acts.

We kind of started this series by asking a few questions that nobody really has time to ask except the people (like me) that spend their lives thinking about them. Questions like: how did the church survive the first century? How did Christianity survive the Roman Empire? How did it survive 1st century Judaism? How did it survive 70AD when all of ancient Judaism came to a screeching halt as the temple was torn down, the city was invaded and all the Jews were thrown out of Jerusalem?

When you think about it, it seems far-fetched to think that a small group of unconnected, unpowerful people, who simply believed a homeless Jewish rabbi was the Messiah, would grow into a world-wide movement 2000 years later but here we are. How did Jesus' message and movement escape the 1st century?

We've seen the beginning of some of the answers to that question. We studied the time when about 120 people poured into the streets of Jerusalem 2 months after the resurrection and said, "Jesus, who was crucified right outside these walls, rose from the dead, right outside these walls and we are eyewitnesses to a resurrected Savior." And of the sudden the city of Jerusalem was turned on its head.

Within a few weeks over 5000 men, plus women and children, who knew Jesus had been crucified, embraced the idea that He was in fact the Messiah, sent from God and had risen from the dead.

It just kept growing and moving and expanding and then we saw last week how the first Christian missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, were sent to take this message all over the known world. They travelled through Turkey and Greece and throughout the Mediterranean Rim starting new ecclesia's, gatherings, churches.

For years and years and years Paul traveled throughout that part of the world and everywhere he went he taught, “God has done something extraordinary in human history. He’s finally answered the question, ‘How do we have peace with God when we know we’ve broken His law?’ ‘What do we do about our sin?’ God has answered that by sending His son into this world.” Everywhere he went he taught that which leads us to today’s story.

While Paul was doing that, back in Jerusalem, which was kind of the capital or hub of the church, a controversy had started brewing. This 2000 year old controversy is so relevant for us today and so relevant for the modern church. It’s a controversy that many of you have experienced.

It’s why many of you hadn’t been to church for a very long time until you started coming to this church. It’s why some of your parents stopped going to church when you were young and haven’t been back since. It’s why some people believe in Jesus and want to find rest for their souls but they look everywhere else but the church for answers. It’s the original controversy in the church that’s still with us today.

Here’s what the controversy was about: who gets to be a part of the church? Who gets in? How good do you have to be? How many rules do you have to keep? How much of your lifestyle do you have to clean up before you can be accepted in the church? Who gets to be a part of the church?

The controversy is very understandable if you understand some of the dynamics going on in the 1st century. You had the Jews with the 10 commandments and 600 other laws that they had been taught their whole life. Many of them basically believed that Christianity was just an extension of Judaism. So they assumed that if you wanted to become a follower of Jesus you had to first be a follower of Moses. Essentially you had to become Jewish before you could be a part of Jesus’ church.

But there were also Gentile Christians hearing Paul’s teaching and he never required them to become Jewish before they followed Jesus.

So they were hearing messages from Jerusalem about becoming Jewish first and jumping through some hoops and then they could be a part of the church. So they were confused, “Wait a minute, Paul told us that Jesus died for our sins and we can have

peace through grace and forgiveness but the leaders in Jerusalem are telling us it's not that easy?"

Again, for some of you, this is the very reason you gave up on church. You got the feeling that you just weren't good enough to be a church person.

The flip side of it is this: if you've been a Christian for more than 10 years or if you were born in the church like me and your first word was "Transubstantiation" you can understand the other side of the conflict because part of following Jesus is living by a moral or ethical standard. There are some do's and don'ts, there are some behaviors that the Bible teaches we should adopt and some we should get rid of.

Christianity has some moral imperatives but at the same time there is incredible grace and forgiveness. And there seems to be times the truth of the gospel, "here's what's right and here's what's wrong", comes into conflict with the grace of the gospel. When there's a conflict church people can tend to get really weird. We've been guilty, I've been guilty of building walls instead of bridges. We'll say, "We want you to be a part of Jesus' church but before you do here's a few things you need to get right first."

Here's the amazing thing about this dynamic and I'll confess right up front that I do not completely understand this but I love it and believe it's true. When Jesus; perfect, holy God in a body, when he interacted with the non-church people of his day, John tells us that he was full of grace and truth. He wasn't the balance of grace and truth, that's what churches like to do. We've got to be balanced. John says, "No, I really didn't see any balance. He just completely embodied all of grace and all of truth. In Him there was no conflict between the two."

When the local church gets this right it's not a balancing act, it's not a, "Clean up yourself first and then you can come." And neither is it a, "Let's throw away the standards so everybody feels good about themselves." When the local church gets this right, when there is an embodiment of grace and truth; forgiveness isn't dumbed down, grace isn't dumbed down, and the moral imperatives taught in scripture aren't dumbed down. They all co-exist in a powerful, powerful way.

The early church was wrestling with this, like we wrestle with this and I want us to take a look at it today.

We're about 20 or so year's post-resurrection. This is right when Paul is finishing up his very first missionary journey. It's the very first, recorded church business meeting. I know that sounds really exciting to some of you but there are some huge takeaways for us this morning as we think about our stewardship of the modern, local church.

We're going to be in **Acts 15** this morning. I want to give you a head's up *in case there are little ears here this morning*, there's a part of this that is a little PG-13ish. But it's in the Bible and it's central to the story and we're going to pause on it for a minute and deal with it. *Don't get mad at me because we've got a great environment for your kids to go to during this service and you should take them there.*

Now that I've got everybody's attention, here we go. **¹Some men came down from Judea**(which is where Jerusalem was) **to Antioch**(read about that place last week) **and were teaching the brothers**("brothers" just means Christians so these Jews from Jerusalem go to Antioch and here's their message for these brand new Gentile Christians): **"Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."**

Ok, wait a minute... what?

Unless you have minor, ok major surgery, you can't be a Christian.

Paul didn't tell us about that part. What exactly are you saying?

We're saying you can't be a Christian until you're Jewish. So make you're appointment with your family doctor and get it taken care of.

What this meant was that the new member's class was primarily women and children. The guys are all sitting outside in the chariot going, "Honey, you go ahead I've really got to think about this. I love Jesus but..."

We want to hurry past this but we need to think through it. This was serious. These Jewish believers really thought you had to get circumcised before you could be fully embraced by Jesus' church. The men had to join the Moses club before they could join the Jesus club.

As you might imagine, **²This brought Paul**(who had been traveling all throughout the Gentile world teaching, "It's simple, just embrace and follow Jesus.") **and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along**

with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem (where this message is coming from) to see the apostles and elders about this question.

They're going back to Jerusalem to talk to the original disciples and elders of the church to get things straightened out because this could end up really bad for Paul and really bad for Jesus' church outside of the Jewish world.

Luke goes on, ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the (ecclesia, the gathering) church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

So Paul tells them, "For the last year and half- two years I've been travelling all over the place planting other churches, doing what Jesus told us to and everywhere I go there are Gentiles embracing Jesus and He's doing incredible things in their life. But I haven't been telling them they have to become Moses followers before they become Jesus followers. So we just need to get on the same page about this because we're sending mixed messages guys."

Here's what happens. ⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees (this was the group that put Jesus to death, right? Well, once Jesus rose from the dead some of them surrendered their lives to Him and joined the church. But they are so committed to the law of Moses they're struggling with letting just anybody join the church) stood up and said (here's their argument), "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

We struggle with this a little bit so let me give you the 30 second version. When we think about the law in scripture we think the 10 commandments. Those are good things but that's not what they're talking about here. They were talking about the 613 other laws.

So here's what they're saying, "Paul you need to get back on that boat, go back to all those churches you've started and teach all those Gentiles how to change their entire lifestyle to adapt to the 613 laws. They have to eat, dress, walk, plan and talk differently. And once they've done that and the men get the surgery, they can be a part of the church."

Luke goes on, ⁷After much discussion, Peter (he's come out of hiding) got up and addressed them: (Peter reminds them of what happened just a few chapters ago)

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. He’s reminding them of the time he went down to Cornelius’ house and all that took place there. ⁸God, (if you’ve been in the church for longer than 10 years you need to underline this next phrase) **who knows the heart**, (do you believe that? I don’t know you’re heart I only know your behavior. I don’t know your heart I only know how you dress. I don’t know your heart I just know how many tattoos and piercings you’ve got. I don’t know your heart I just know how you talk. I don’t know your heart I just know the kind of music you listen to or movies you watch. I don’t know your heart I just know you’re sitting in my pew.) **showed that he accepted them(Gentiles) by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.**

To which the Pharisees would say, “He might have purified their hearts but they’ve got some nasty Gentile habits. They don’t eat right. They don’t dress right. They’re offensive.”

So Peter asks them a question, **¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples(the brand new Gentile converts) a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?**

In other words, “Bob, I see you back there in the back row. Bob, have you ever broken the law? I saw you the other day at the temple making a sin offering so obviously you have. And Jim, you were in line right behind him weren’t you? Yeah you were.

Look guys, we don’t even keep the law that well. How in the world are we going to tell the Gentiles, who’ve never heard these laws, to obey something that has been a burden to us for centuries? We can’t expect that of them.”

This is Peter, this the guy in the early church saying all of this and I don’t know this but I think it got pretty quiet and everybody stared at the floor at this point. Peter answers his own question, **¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.**” The ground is level at the foot of the cross guys. It is through grace that we are all saved.

And this is important for all of us, those who haven’t been to church in years or you never miss, listen: God can purify a heart before He purifies behavior. God can

purify your heart before you drop that nasty habit. God can purify a heart before you fix your marriage. God can purify your heart before you figure out you've got some behaviors that drive you to decisions you're ashamed of. If he can do that for you, he can do that for people that you find offensive.

Paul and Barnabas talk a little more about what has happened on their journeys and after all that James stands up, James the brother of Jesus. The guy you could pull off to the side and ask, "When he was 10 what was he really like? He never talked back to your mom, really? We believe and everything but fill in some gaps for us here."

James has kind of started to take over as the leader of the church there in Jerusalem so after hearing Peter talk and Paul and Barnabas' report on everything God was doing through them, He stands up and makes the most extraordinary statement. You need to know, as your pastor, this statement rattles around in my head every single day. This is one of those verses that I can't get away from.

¹⁹"It is my judgment(in other words, we're ending the conversation right here), **therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.**

I know we have a moral standard. I know all the rules and commandments. I know all about grace too. I know there will be conflicts at times that we won't be able to sort out but here's what James concluded and I agree wholeheartedly with him, we should not make it difficult for people who are turning to God. Anything that makes it difficult for people who are turning to God should be removed if at all possible.

James was saying, "Come on fellas, let's not make it difficult because anything we do that makes it unnecessarily difficult is resisting the will of God."

So what should we do James? **²⁰Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.**

The guy taking notes is going, "What's the 4th thing?" James says, "That's it." So James, you've just taken 613 laws and 10 commandments and set them aside to require, basically two things: try not to offend the Jews by what you eat and abstain from sexual immorality. That's it?

What about...

Let's not burden them with all of that just yet. Let's just tell them these few things. Be sensitive to your Jewish brothers and sisters in what you eat and abstain from sexual immorality. That's it.

There's a lot more to it than it looks like on the surface and we don't have time to get into it all that but here's what happened. Everybody agrees with James(which is amazing in and of itself) but they choose some men and decide to hand deliver a letter to these new Gentile churches, ³⁰The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. So the church has gathered together and they're opening the envelope and all the men have their fingers crossed as they're reading the letter. ³¹The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.

And in that moment, the church dodges its first big split. You know what the split was going to be over? Moral imperatives/standards/do's and don'ts vs. grace. They decided, "You know what? They shouldn't be in conflict. We can embody, not the balance of, but all of grace and truth."

I know this is a huge subject and we obviously can't tackle it all today but I just want to give you 3 statements because every local church, every denomination, struggles with this. If we had time I could show you from history how this conflict has raised its ugly head in every generation with some terrible consequences.

So, 3 things that we will be tempted to drift toward and need to intentionally resist when it comes to this idea of being full of grace and truth.

1. We've got to avoid the drift toward insiders and away from outsiders.

Every local church, over time, drifts toward focusing on insiders and by insiders I mean the people who are already there, know the songs, know where to sit, know where to take their kids, and know the whole deal. Every local church drifts toward becoming insider focused.

In my world, people who don't attend here never call to complain. People who don't attend here never want an appointment with me. People who don't attend here ignore us.

It's the squeaky wheel principle and it's just too easy for churches to become focused on the people who are there, the people paying the bills, the people doing the

work, the people who squeak the loudest, it's the natural tendency. But that doesn't mean it's the right tendency.

In order to be a church where grace and truth is embodied, not just one or the other, we've got to intentionally resist the drift toward insiders and ignoring those on the outside.

The worst thing that could happen to us as a church is that we would get satisfied where we're at and who we've got and just sit back and do our thing week after week and relax because we're good. What a terrible thing to drift toward.

The image that comes to mind when I think about this is the image of getting stuck in a rut and you know what a rut is? It's a coffin with the ends knocked out.

We don't want to get there and the way we make sure we don't is by avoiding the drift towards insiders and away from outsiders.

2. The drift toward law and away from grace.

This one's so insidious. When I say toward law and away from grace I'm not talking theologically, I'm talking practically. The natural tendency for local churches is to have a lot of policies and to think in terms of categories. It's exactly what happened in the early church.

Category: Gentile. Policy: You've got to be like Moses. Category: Gentile. Policy: You've got to follow the law. That way we don't have to have any hard conversations. I don't even need to know your name. Just tell me if you're following the law(policy) and that will tell me which category to put you in.

That's how churches drift away from grace and towards the law.

I've told our staff, and it's frustrating at times, "We're not going to have a lot of policies." "Why?" "Because we're going to have conversations." Policies remove the need to have conversations.

Jesus had conversations, right? He's walking along and see's Matthew, the tax collector who everybody hates, sitting at his tax booth and says, "Matthew why don't you follow us?" And Peter's going, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, category Jesus! He's a tax collector. And policy says you must no longer be a tax collector to be a follower of Jesus. So Matt when you figure that out then you can follow."

Jesus is going, “Shut up Peter. Matthew just come with us.” “But he’s a tax collector, he’s in the wrong category.” Jesus says, “I don’t care. I just want to start a relationship.”

Maybe an even better illustration from **John 8**. Jesus met a woman caught in adultery and everybody wanted to stone her. But Jesus basically says to the crowd, “Go stone yourself.” That’s basically what he said to them.

But then he says to her, “Look, you committed adultery, don’t do that anymore. And by the way, I don’t condemn you.”

And the disciples are going, “But Jesus she’s an adulterer and she hasn’t committed not to do it again.” Category. Policy.

Jesus says, “I’m not doing categories or policies. I don’t condemn you now don’t do that anymore.”

“But what if she goes back and does...”

“Shhhhh. It’s not about categories and policies. I want to have a conversation based in relationship.”

Churches that are ok with the messiness of very little policy and no categories are far more likely to experience the amazing, mystical merger of uncompromised truth and full-on grace.

Policies and categories are easy. You don’t have to meet with anybody, you just have to send them a form. Conversations, grace is messy and wonderful and it’s powerful. It’s what Jesus did and it’s what the local church is supposed to do as well.

3. The drift toward preserving rather than advancing.

This is so subtle. For those of you who have ever started your own business you know all about this. Remember when you started and you had nothing? There was nothing to preserve because you had nothing. But then you started getting something and all the sudden you started to protect. In the beginning you were willing to risk everything because there wasn’t a whole lot to risk but over time you became risk adverse.

Churches can drift the same way. In the beginning this church had nothing. They had a little building on 3½ acres of land in Southwest Topeka. Now we’ve got 22,000

square feet, 40 acres of land, a million dollars in the bank, staff and income and we've got a lot.

If we're not careful our tendency will be to preserve all of that and like the Jews, we'll drift away from advancing the kingdom because we want to preserve all this good stuff. The Jews wanted preserve the law, something that was good, something Jesus himself said was good but they forgot the law was given to advance the kingdom.

Jesus came along and said we're going to take some risks', even though they're risky. We're going to love some people, even though they're messy. We're going to accept some people that are hard to accept but we will not let our desire to preserve over-ride our mission to advance.

We have to think about holding our church like this, open-handed. God gave it and He can take it back whenever He wants. It is His church and His mission and he's simply given us the responsibility to manage it. We're going to be wise and responsible and good stewards of it but we can't drift into preservation mode. It happens to churches all the time but it doesn't have to.

So I want us to make 3 commitments today. I know most of us won't remember this past this afternoon but I want you to know, I'm serious about these three things and I want us to be serious about them as a church.

1. Be bold.

This is how we keep from drifting toward being insider focused. You be bold in terms of developing relationships with "outsiders". You be bold in terms of who you invite and what you invite them to. You be bold in terms of how you live your life around people who don't know Jesus. We be bold in keeping each other accountable so this church continues to be open and welcome to people who don't consider themselves church people. Be bold. Not a bully, just bold.

2. We've got to err on the side of grace.

When there's a conflict between the moral imperative, what the Bible teaches and somebody who's not quite there yet, we have to decide: if we're gonna make a mistake, if we're gonna go too far either way let's err on the side of grace.

Because come on, aren't you glad God errs on the side of grace with you? Aren't you glad He doesn't say, "I'll love and accept you but here's 613 things you need to do first and once you've got those down call me."

Aren't you glad He errs on the side of grace? So why wouldn't we err on the side of grace? That's how we ensure we never become about categories and policy.

3. Remain open-handed.

We have a lot to protect. I feel that tension more than anybody else. Land, money, a pastoral staff, our reputation in our community, income, all these different things but I hope we take more risks' in the next 10, 20, 30 years as a church than we've ever taken. We have more to risk, we have more to lose than this church has ever had before but we've also got more potential than we've ever had before.

Let's not be one of those churches that drifts into a posture of protecting something as opposed to advancing something. Because we believe James was right, don't we? He stood up and said, "I can't answer all the questions, I can't deal with all the particulars but here's what I know is true: we can't make it difficult for those who are turning to God." We believe that and that's how you advance the kingdom.

If we can be intentional about avoiding these drifts, if we can be intentional about this mystical joining of grace and truth then God will use us, God will use you to do something unique and remarkable in our generation to further this thing called the church.