

**WHEN WE DISAGREE**  
**Acts 21:1-6**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on September 1, 2019, the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as the final in a summer sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles, entitled "When..."*

**INTRODUCTION AND READING OF SCRIPTURE**

We have been focused on the Book of Acts this summer, in which its author Luke traces events and developments in the earliest decades of the church, first under the leadership of Peter, then of Paul. These early Christians and their leaders take the hope and idealism that came out of the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit they had received at Pentecost and lead the Christian movement from its roots in Judaism and Jerusalem into the Greco-Roman world culturally, religiously, geographically.

For the last sermon in the series, I want us to follow as a *disagreement* arises between Paul and other leaders in the church, concerning whether, in light of the impending threat to his life, Paul should go to Jerusalem.

As I read a few verses from Acts, I ask you to pay particular attention to *the role of the Holy Spirit* in what on the surface appears to be a dispute over where next to travel.

We begin at Acts 19:21. Feel free to turn in your pew Bibles to page 131 in the New Testament.

*Now after these things had been accomplished, Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, 'After I have gone there, I must also see Rome.'*

On the next page, in Acts 20:22-23, Paul is speaking to the elders at Ephesus about his plans:

*And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me.*

Then in Chapter 21, starting at Verse 1, Luke describes the beginning of the trip from Ephesus to Jerusalem:

*When we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. When we found a ship bound for Phoenicia, we went on board and set sail. We came in sight of Cyprus; and leaving it on our left, we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, because the ship was to unload its cargo there. We looked up the disciples and stayed there for seven days.*

*Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.*

*When our days there were ended, we left and proceeded on our journey; and all of them, with wives and children, escorted us outside the city. There we knelt down on the beach and prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.*

## SERMON

Let us pray: *Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; Kindle the flame of sacred love; in these expectant hearts of ours. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Most of us learn in elementary school that human history has lived through the Bronze Age and the Ice Age and the Stone Age. In high school or college, we learn about the Middle Ages, the Age of Enlightenment, the Age of Exploration. It may well be that when historians look back on this time in history, if our decades rise to the honor of receiving a title, ours may come to be known as “The Age of Disagreement.”

We seem to disagree over our politics, our policies, our Presidents. We disagree over our priorities as a people. And if we live in the United Kingdom, we seem to disagree over *whether* to “exit” the European Union, *how* to “exit,” and even *whether or not* Parliament should meet to try, once again, to exit. So deep is the disagreement across the waters that one of the most calm and stately people on the planet – Queen Elizabeth – has been drawn into this disagreement in the sixty-seventh years of her reign.

No matter the country, we live in an Age of Disagreement.

### I.

As much as we might yearn and expect otherwise, disagreement is never absent for very long in the life and history of the Christian faith. Following the burst of energy and hope coming out of Pentecost, Luke tells us at two places that these earlier believers “were *together* and had *all things in common*”<sup>1</sup> and that “no one claimed private ownership over any possessions.”<sup>2</sup> Yet these bold claims are followed with stories of two disciples, Ananias and Sapphira, selling property and holding back on what they share with the church<sup>3</sup> and of different groups within the church claiming that their widows were not being cared for as equitably as other widows in the church.<sup>4</sup>

Later, in Ephesus and Tyre, a dispute breaks out between the Apostle Paul and his colleagues concerning whether or not Paul should go to Jerusalem in light of the impending threats on his life there. Paul says yes. Many of his colleagues say no.

But what makes this dispute about more than geography or strategic travel itineraries is that Paul and the Christians in Tyre each claim to speak from a deeply held sense that *the Holy Spirit* is guiding them in their position on this matter.<sup>5</sup> You heard it earlier, but listen again:

*Paul resolved in the Spirit ...to...to Jerusalem*

*“...as a captive to the Spirit,” Paul says, “I am on my way to Jerusalem...”*

Yet...

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:44-45.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 4:32.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 5:1-11.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 6:1-7/

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Matthew L. Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 153-158, for this background information.

*Through the Spirit [leaders in Tyre] told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.*

Disagreement. Serious disagreement. Between Paul as a leader of the church and leaders of the church in Tyre and Ephesus. Both factions “resolved in,” “captive to,” or making their decision “through the Spirit.”

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In Luke and Acts, both of which are written by Luke, the Holy Spirit appears as a *major character*.

- It is the Spirit which is said to “come upon” Mary and “overshadow” her, leading “the child to be born to be holy” and to be called “the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35).
- It is the Spirit that “descends upon Jesus as a dove” at his baptism and then drives him into the wilderness to be tempted (Luke 3:21 and 4:1).
- At Pentecost, it is the Spirit that appears to disciples after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, manifesting itself as tongues of fire and enabling them to speak and hear in languages not their own (Acts 2:1-13).

The Holy Spirit is such a prominent character that the Book of Acts is sometimes nicknamed “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.”

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What this means for us is that when Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem – knowing full well he will face persecution and the threat of death – that determination comes from his being sent *by the Spirit*. Likewise, when the Christians at Tyre (and later at Ephesus) urge Paul *not* to go to Jerusalem – knowing full well he will face persecution and the threat of death – they too at least believe they are being led *by the Spirit*. Thus, this is not just a disagreement over travel plans, but rather a disagreement between two groups of people – Paul and his close associates and Tyrian and Ephesian leaders – each of whom *in the Spirit of God* believe two different things.

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This is not something that we American/Christian/Protestant/Presbyterians like. We are binary thinkers:

- Left or right
- Republican or Democratic
- Red or blue
- Liberal or conservative
- SEC football or ACC basketball
- Right or wrong
- Good or evil

We may not like the choices before us from time to time, but for the most part, we would rather choose between one thing and another than to muddy the waters with more choices or even to think that in the way

of God two seemingly opposite things *could* be true. We may live in one of the most educated Zip Codes in the world, but choosing between more than two options is more than our minds can sometimes handle.

So when the Spirit tells Paul “Go to Jerusalem” and when the Spirit leads Christians with whom Paul is staying to say to Paul: “don’t go to Jerusalem” we are perplexed to say the least.

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In our perplexity, we may even look for possible *human* explanations:

- Well one of them has to be *misinterpreting* what the Spirit is saying.
- Maybe the Holy Spirit is *testing* them to see how they figure it out.
- Maybe one of them is just *using* the Holy Spirit to make their point.

But none of those explanation satisfies here. In this situation, as far as it is possible for each person involved to determine, the Holy Spirit is leading some to say “Go to Jerusalem” and others to say “Don’t go to Jerusalem.” It is almost Lincoln’s Second Inaugural: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God...” but their reading and prayer leads them to entirely different conclusions.

## II.

So what do they do?

Listen to the narration, which is provided in the first person plural, by someone who is travelling with Paul but may or may not agree with his decision to go to Jerusalem.

*When our days... [in Tyre] were ended, we left and proceeded on our journey;*

*All of [the leaders of Tyre (who at that time were male)], with wives and children, escorted us outside the city.*

*There we knelt down on the beach and prayed and said farewell to one another.*

*Then we went on board the ship [to Jerusalem], and they returned home.*

Nobody changes his or her mind. Nobody gives in. Nobody compromises (as important and valuable as compromise often is). But *in the midst* of their disagreement, *in spite of* their disagreement:

- They *process* to the gates of the city *together*.
- They go to a *beach* – a place where so much of what they had witnessed or heard about Christ had occurred and thus a place of memory for them both.
- They *kneel* and *pray* together.
- They say *farewell* to one another – poignant, bittersweet, perhaps with embrace, perhaps with tears.

- Then Paul and his party *board the ship* that will ultimately take them to Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>
- And the leaders of the church at Tyre *return to their homes*.

And we read forward in the last quarter of Acts, Paul is indeed arrested and jailed.<sup>7</sup> He is persecuted. He is ultimately placed under house arrest in Rome.<sup>8</sup> And we learn outside the New Testament, that Rome is where Paul likely died. Thus, in the spirit, Paul knew he was going to face these things. In the Spirit, the leaders of Ephesus and Tyre knew. And he did face them.

The disagreement between Paul and church leaders is not resolved in this story, but the key is that they remain in community. They process to a place of shared sacred memory, a beach not unlike those on which Jesus often taught. They pray. They part. But even in their parting, they respect what *the Spirit* is saying to the other, and they remain in community.

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I don't know how easily these disagreements within the early Christian community translate into broader aspects of our Age of Disagreement.

But I think this story from the early church can show that we as human beings can *talk together* in community about what the deepest aspects of our consciences lead us to believe and do. We can *process together* to the edge of our cities and return to places of common learning and sacred memory. And when we go our separate ways, we can do so with mutual respect. In so doing we will follow in a secular way something embodied in this incident that occurred in the early days of Christianity.

I believe I shared with you before that the first time I visited Washington, D. C. was in 1990, when I visited here to conduct a wedding. The first monument I wanted to visit was the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial which had opened eight years earlier. As I walked along the black granite wall I was drawn to the people standing and looking at the names engraved – making their own etchings, bowing in prayer, wiping tears from their eyes.

At one point I noticed two men standing together looking at an etching they had made.

- One was stocky, bearded, long-haired, wearing blue jeans and a jacket that said “Vietnam Veterans Against the War.”
- The other was neat, trim, in Navy Blues and polished shoes.
- They stood together, arm in arm, reading the name and touching the paper on which one of them had etched it. They embraced. They shared tears. Then one went this way and the other that way.

I can only imagine how each came to believe what he believed concerning our involvement in Vietnam, how each came to do what they were currently doing in light of that involvement and their belief.

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<sup>6</sup> The arrival in Jerusalem occurs in Acts 21:17.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 21:27.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 28:11-16.

I can only imagine the loss they felt as they traced the name on the wall and held the etching.

I can only guess how they were related to the person who bore the name, and how they were related to each other: brothers, cousins, friends, perhaps former shipmates.

I do not know what if anything they said in their moment of embrace and in their moment of parting. But even in the disagreement reflected in the attire each had chosen to wear to the dark, granite wall, they were *together – together* – as they stood and as they parted.

Sometimes the Spirit seems to say – perhaps even says – two different things to two different people. “Go to Jerusalem.” “Don’t go to Jerusalem.”

Beneath such unfathomable disagreement, such radically different instructions, in the mystery of who the Spirit is, if we let ourselves, if we work at it hard enough, we can find a unity more important, more beautiful, than even agreement.

Amen.

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