



When God Attends Your Meeting

TEXT
Acts 15:1–21

June 18, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This was quite a meeting. On the one hand, I don't know that the church has ever had a meeting quite like this one. This meeting brought more change to the church than any other moment in her history. On the other hand, this is the meeting the church needs to have every day.

Luke's theology is clear; God is on the move. The Spirit will not let the church remain stagnant. It's not OK for the church to be the same community tomorrow that it was yesterday.

In this text, we witness the church, the organization, the community of the church struggling to keep up with God. That's always our posture, struggling to keep up with God. We can fail to follow God, we can walk away from God, but we never get ahead of God.

Yet, in this moment, the church takes a giant step forward. This meeting changes the church forever. I think it was because the Spirit was there. Things had changed, and they met to decide what to do in response to the change. I don't have to tell you that it was a painful meeting. There is no change, and I mean *no* change, that fails to cause grief to some.

This sanctuary, here on our Mission campus, used to be painted green. It was called "Meneilly Green." When we removed the old organ, there were some pipes still painted Meneilly Green. Just like this one!

Sometime before I arrived, you repainted the sanctuary and changed the color from Meneilly Green to a color called Divinity White. We went from Meneilly to God. Things have really gone downhill now, for this new color is called Uncertain Gray. We have gone from Meneilly, to the Divine, to uncertainty. Oh well. We believe, help our unbelief.

Not long after we came here, I met a woman at a social gathering. She told me she used to go to Village and was married by Dr. Bob. It's not an uncommon thing to hear. She said, "But we left a few years ago."

"Why?" I asked.

"We couldn't believe they repainted the sanctuary. We just loved that green sanctuary."

There is no change that fails to cause grief for some.

This meeting in Acts is painful. There was no small dissension and debate. The debate was not about custom or aesthetics or culture. This change cut to the core of who the church un-

derstood herself to be. With this meeting, the church becomes something completely new. I think that is because the Spirit is there.

Peter baptized Gentiles. We read about it last week. He went to Cornelius's house, told them about Jesus, the Spirit came upon them, and Peter thought, "Well, if God comes to them, how can we keep them away?" He baptized them.

Baptism means these Gentiles are part of the church now. That's why they had the meeting. The question of the meeting was this: If Gentiles are included in the church, what do they have to do to qualify? Some said they have to obey the law of Moses. They can be Christian, but they have to be Jewish first.

Now this may seem silly to you today, but remember this: Jesus was the Christ. You remember that Christ is not a last name but rather a title. He is not Jesus Christ, son of Joe and Mary Christ. He is Jesus the Christ, Jesus the promised one of Judaism, the Messiah.

So if you are following the Christ, the faith you are practicing is Judaism. The earliest followers of Jesus were all Jews practicing Judaism. And one way to define being Jewish is that

you are not Gentile: They didn't eat together; they didn't pray together; they didn't belong to one another. But if that line gets blurred, who are we now?

Oh, this was a painful meeting. It was the kind of meeting you wish you could just skip and do yard work. Ask about it afterwards: "How did it go? Wish I could have been there. Had to plant these petunias."

It's painful because once again we find the Spirit teaching the church to do what their faith had previously taught them not to do. To be faithful before meant being set apart from Gentiles. Don't pray with them, don't eat with them, and certainly don't welcome them into the family.

But now, it seems that the Spirit is calling the church to welcome Gentiles. How can faith call us to do today what faith called us not to do yesterday? I'd rather do yard work.

There was no small dissension and debate. They decided to welcome Gentiles. This is the biggest reformation in the history of the church. But I am intrigued — not only by what they decided, but how they made this decision.

There is something in this story that can help us today. This story teaches us a bit about how to have a meeting. Doesn't that sound exciting!

We Presbyterians catch a lot of grief for meeting all the time. We have committees for everything. And committees are not the most efficient means of making a decision. And in committees, there can be no small dissension and debate. But some-

times it is obvious that the Spirit shows up in the committee.

There are some reasons, both biblical and practical, that we believe in meetings. One reason we value the meeting is because we believe in sin. Now I'm not saying that a church meeting will make you believe in sin, although some might. I'm saying that because of sin, meetings matter.

Think of sin this way: It is the temptation to believe that I am right more than I really am.

All of us have life experiences that teach us the way things should be done. We have our thoughts on parenting and politics, on what makes a good government and on what makes good music. We have our view of the world. That's a beautiful thing. But, and here's the thing, more often than we might be aware, we assume our view of things is the right way to view things ... the way things should be.

But then I sit in a meeting, and I hear another perspective. All of a sudden, my way, my view, my certainty about things is called into question. No one is right all the time.

When my mother-in-law was still alive, she would come visit us. She was a fantastic cook, a culinary queen. She knew her way around a kitchen, and she knew how to arrange the kitchen — which turns out was not exactly the same way Carol arranged the kitchen. So the entire time Ann was visiting us, she would correct things. Carol could tell her mother, "We put knives in this drawer," but Ann would say, "That's OK, I have time to fix that." She would put them

where they are supposed to go. Once she got our kitchen set up the way it should be, she would go home. It would take me two weeks to find the cutting boards.

Now this is not a matter of right and wrong, although I don't know that my mother-in-law would agree. This is just a matter of personal preference. There can be more than one place to put cutting boards in a kitchen.

But when we think we are right, we will continue to think we are right until something shows us another way. That can be the gift of the meeting.

But there is something else. Sometimes in the midst of the dissension and debate of the meeting, something completely new emerges. I am convinced that the movement of God is seen most clearly among us, not in us individually, but together.

Like hydrogen and oxygen coming together to make water, something completely new — sometimes the hydrogen and oxygen of the church's various voices creates baptismal waters that are completely new.

But that can only happen when those in the meeting choose to listen, not just to the wisdom of our own heart, but to one another. That's the hard part. When I hear something out of step with my thought, I have a choice. I can double down on what I already know and assume it is all that can and should be known, or I can listen; and maybe in the listening, we hear the whisper of God.

Something happened this week in Washington. The arrogance that is the atmosphere of our culture was shaken by

tragedy. Rep. Steve Scalise was shot, evidently because he is a Republican. It should not surprise us because the cultural talk in our nation these days is the talk of absolutes, of right versus wrong, and the arrogance that leads to violence finds its home on the left and the right.

Too often our parties speak of the other as un-American, as unintelligent, even as the enemy. That kind of talk is found in diners and coffee shops and sometimes church hallways. It is also heard in the halls of Congress and from the White House — not just on the campaign trail, but in the workings of governance.

I was 8 or 9 years old, sitting in my father's car in the parking lot of the church. I was waiting to get a ride home. There was a man talking to my dad. They stood just outside the car, so I could hear them. He said he couldn't believe it, and he didn't know what to do. His son had made up his mind. He was getting married. The problem, he was marrying a black woman.

That was a thing not so long ago, and for some still today. But do you know what is more concerning than cross racial marriage today? It's cross party marriage. According to a Yougov survey, between one third and one half of respondents expressed that they would be somewhat to very upset if their son or daughter married someone from the other political party.¹

But this week, we thought differently. Paul Ryan said that an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us. Nancy Pelosi said we are all "Team Scalise."

And this from those who have launched more than their share of attacks on the other and have done whatever it takes for their team to win. But not this week.

And no one had to tell us that being American first and partisan second is patriotic. We saw it this week. And we saw that it was good.

We have choices to make. When we face those of different perspectives, we can double down on what we already know and assume that is all that can or should be known. Or we can listen, and maybe the hydrogen and oxygen of our different perspectives can give birth to the holy water of a new day.

When the meeting becomes not just a meeting on the calendar, but a meeting of our hearts, perhaps we will hear the whisper of God. And who knows, maybe we will take one more step in our struggle to keep up with God.

¹"How We Became Bitter Political Enemies," Emily Badger and Niraj Chokshi, *New York Times*, June 15, 2017

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.