

Sermon Text For September 22, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Job 42:10-17, Acts 15:36-41

“Are two better than one?”

This past week the church had a great opportunity to be seen as helping out to stamp out hunger. At the Garden Spot – LS game our foodbank was invited to represent the LS side and as people brought in food they got a t-shirt as a thank you. It was great to be at a football game, first time in many years for me. Before the first quarter ended we had scored 5 touchdowns. But we had also gathered boxes and boxes of food from students and adults alike. On the Garden Spot side they had also gathered boxes and boxes of food. Even though on the field we were rivals, behind the scenes we were working together to take another step to help white out hunger.

The ability to work together even if you are considered rivals for the common good is something that our society needs to see publicly. It is also something that you have to learn to do and not by going to classes, but by simply living a life where you look for opportunities to spend time with people who are different from you, think different from you, and believe in things that are different from what you believe.

Our first Scripture today paints the picture of what happens to Job after tragedy strikes him and he remains faithful. During his tragedy his friends had turned their back on him and basically blamed him for his situation. But Job does not blame them and forgives them for their insensitive approach to his life situations where his children had been killed, his property ruined, and his financial means destroyed. He prays for them and the Lord not only restores his fortunes but repays him double of what he had.

In our Scripture today we find all of the disciples gathered together with all of the missionaries and church workers including Paul for one of the most important church conferences of this young fledgling church. This conference was geared around answering one very important question that had faced the missionaries on their journeys. The church makes it through that conference with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and from that time on the church explodes. God was able to take a potentially dangerous and serious situation, one where the apostles were divided, and mold it to God’s own purposes that eventually translated to a booming, God-inspired church. Let’s read Acts 15:36-41.

READ SCRIPTURE

Before Paul and Barnabas split up we find out that all of the church leaders have congregated in Jerusalem to decide a very serious and controversial issue in the church. We've talked about this probably for more than you wanted to talk about. If you have been here over the past month you know the issue. This was the question of the controversy: in order to be saved was it enough to believe in Jesus Christ or did one have to follow the law of Moses.

Now that may not seem like a big deal to you but put yourselves in the position of these gentiles who wanted to follow Christ but they weren't allowed to unless they followed certain foreign customs. It would almost be like not approving new members unless you get branded with the letters FPC on your arm and promise to follow all of the dietary laws of Leviticus. I would think that that would be a stumbling block for many of us and prevent many of us from joining the church.

Well this became a major issue because the two most successful missionaries of the early church, Paul and Barnabas, were bringing uncircumcised gentiles into the synagogues and house meetings because they had heard and believed in the good news of the Gospel. Something had to be done quickly, a decision had to be made so that the church would agree and not go along as a ship without a rudder.

Peter and the other apostles call a meeting with all of the elders to consider this matter. It was what we would call a general assembly. They had done it before for example in choosing the person to take Judas' place, also when they chose the 7 who would serve the ignored widows. It wasn't foreign for them to gather together to talk about important issues.

The meeting began, there was dissension, debate, hurt feelings, discord, everything that takes place when a church meets to decide on crucial issues. But at the end an agreement was reached. At the end the Spirit of God prevailed. In fact, the message to the outside world was that they had reached an agreement that "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." There were two sides on this issue and neither side won. Instead ultimately it was God who had won and who could claim the victory.

How often do we find ourselves in the midst of conflict feeling like we have to win? This can happen in our work relationships or friendships, but more often than not it happens at home. Whenever I counsel couples before they get married I encourage them not to compromise, because compromise leaves both sides feeling like they've lost. But

instead I tell them to allow the Holy Spirit to creatively come up with something new, a third solution whereby both sides feel as if they have worked together to win together. This is what happened in Acts, there was no one side that had the complete victory. The side that said that believing in Jesus was all people needed to do to live a life in which God would be pleased did not win. The side that said that every believer also has to be circumcised and follow the Levitical law did not win. Instead the resolution was that believing in Jesus was the foundation of salvation but it was also important to keep some of the crucial Jewish laws in order to live a moral life. God ultimately came up with the solution.

Once the conference was over Paul and Barnabas decide that they should go back to those churches that they had begun some time back for a little pastoral care and counseling. Any good pastor not only brings people closer to God but also follows up with them as time passes.

But what seems like a small issue arises. Barnabas wants to bring his cousin along as a helper, John Mark, but Paul doesn't want anything to do with him because he was a quitter. Apparently John Mark had left Paul all of a sudden on one of his missionary journeys. Well this seems fairly insignificant compared to the previous question of what do gentiles need to do in order to be saved. Yet it is about this issue that Scripture states: the disagreement became so sharp that they parted company.

We have a case here where the two best known, most successful missionaries in the history of the church split up over a disagreement. Barnabas takes John Mark and heads to Cyprus his home town and Paul takes Silas and heads to Cilicia where Tarsus is found, also his home town. The Jerusalem assembly had broken up peacefully with the Holy Spirit winning out and yet the post-assembly practical issues divide the most successful missionary team in two.

Some would stop there and say end of story. This is sad that even in the early church there was division and people couldn't get along. But no, this is not the end of the story. As Paul Harvey would say there is the rest of the story. This Scripture teaches us what Paul states elsewhere that all things do work out for good for those who trust in the Lord. All things, every single thing has a providential purpose, even this unfortunate split in Acts.

Paul and Barnabas decide to part company and instead of splitting the young church in two it provided for the church a two pronged attack. No longer was it the one

team of Paul and Barnabas preaching and converting for Jesus' sake but then it became the team of Paul and Silas and Barnabas and John Mark.

The Holy Spirit did not allow the disagreement between these men of God to take away from their ministry, but instead it allowed this division to become a part of God's plan whereby even more people could be saved. In fact, in later letters we find Paul greeting in the name of Christ both Barnabas and John Mark. This disagreement did not divide the church but rather it united it and made it even stronger. In the end we see that two are indeed better than one.

The message that this Scripture allows us to glean and use in our every day life is that even in the face of hardship, tragedy, division, and contentiousness God is able to work in that situation and make something good come from it. Now that we know that God is able to make all things work for the good the question remains are we able to use that which God has given us in our life to make it better or are we the type to dwell on our woes and make things even worse.

I spoke with someone who had undergone chemotherapy and lived through it. She was determined to make not only her life better after the treatment but to use her experience to help others in the church who might be facing a similar experience. She took a bad experience and made it a helpful opportunity.

I have spoken with a number of people who have gone through the agony and anger of divorce. Instead of remaining bitter and unproductive they are determined to start a group that is searching for a new life through Christian fellowship that is based upon a hope for the future. They are able to take a terrible moment in their lives and use it as a bond for others who are going through what they are. Changing the bad to the good.

I have counseled people in the midst of their grieving and not understanding why this loved one is gone from their lives. I have seen a transformation take place in their lives as they awaken and begin to focus upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ instead of death. They are able to take their tragic experience and use it to shed joy and hope in those who are not able to see Christ in the resurrection that follows death.

This Scripture shows us that through the power of God we can take our life experiences that are bad, painful, even tragic and see the hand of God working within these experiences. If we are motivated enough we can even use them to provide hope for ourselves and for others.

I chose this Scripture for a reason that goes beyond our personal lives and being able to take lemons and make lemonade. Our culture is going through a time which is a Jerusalem type setting with delegates deciding issues that some feel will make or break the nation. As our nation faces these difficult issues the question arises what is the role of the church? Scripture must play a role in our lives and as a result our lives must have an impact for good in our culture. Whatever happens in this country we have to be assured that the First Presbyterian Church of Strasburg will make something good come out of it so that here in Strasburg and in this county, people will know that God has the final say in all matters. Thanks be to God for God allows the good to triumph over all things. Amen.