

## “When ‘It Seems Good to the Holy Spirit’...”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden  
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, May 2, 2021

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ  
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

*Scripture Text:*

Acts 15:1-12, 22-30 [NLT]

### OPENING

Last week, you may remember that we talked about the fruit of the Spirit in connection with Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian official being *guidance* in response to a trusting heart.

Well, this week, we’re taking that one step further as we go from relying on the Spirit for guidance to partnering with the Spirit in ministry. And the occasion is most *unlikely*: a Church Council meeting!

How do we know this? Two verses: First, Acts 15:6

*<sup>6</sup> So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue.*

Followed in verse 7 by even *more proof* of a Church Council meeting: “...after long discussion...”! 😊

### SERMON THOUGHTS

The other thing we know is that all those early apostles and elders were Methodists! 😊

I’ll tell you why...because they –

1. broke the rules of the faith at the time,
2. rewrote *The Discipline*, and
3. used “the quadrilateral” to do it!

Allow me to ILLUSTRATE 😊...

The question before the church leaders at that time was a question of *theology*. And a question of theology is always the starting point when it comes to the Methodist quadrilateral: Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

I believe that the vexing questions of any age – those that present an existential crisis to the faith community of the time – are theological questions. From matters concerning:

- whether and under what conditions war is justified,
- to creationism vs. Darwinian evolution,
- to the rights of the unborn,
- to capital punishment,
- to euthanasia,
- to the civil rights of the LGBTQ community,
- to whether or not the use of a vaccine is ethical if its development has used fetal cell lines to prove its effectiveness,

all of these are vexing theological questions. And, they are pertinent not just to the faith community but to society at large.

Of no less a vexing nature was the question at the time of this “church council meeting” of whether or not a person had to be a “good Jew” before one could become a “good Christian”. It may not seem like a big deal to us, but it was a critical question at the time with the potential to split the fledgling church right down the middle!

## TO THE SCRIPTURES

If we look at the passage from Acts 15, all 4 pieces of the quadrilateral were in play:

- ‡ **Scripture** – the reference to the Law of Moses, authoritative Scripture of the day
- ‡ **Tradition** – the understanding and the teaching that circumcision was a condition of salvation had been passed down from generation to generation beginning with Abraham!

Standing against these:

- ‡ **Experience** – the undeniable facts that the Gentiles had received the gift of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, salvation just as the apostles had
- ‡ **Reason** – the argumentation that to impose the Jewish Law on the Gentiles when the Jewish disciples of Jesus Himself couldn't keep that Law was, at best, hypocritical and at worst an affront to God!

All of these elements are in Acts 15.

And with their action – requiring only four conditions for being a disciple of Jesus Christ – the apostles jettisoned 2,000 years of Hebrew tradition, at least 500 years of written Scripture, 600+ laws that the Pharisees had gone to painstaking lengths to articulate from the Hebrew Scriptures, and the central tenet of what it meant to keep covenant with God. Done.

And how did they justify it? Acts 15:28 tells us –

“...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....”

It was breathtaking! AND no less breathtaking than the news 2,000 years in the future, nearly 5 years ago now, that the Western Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church had elected and consecrated an openly gay female bishop...breaking the rules of the faith, rewriting *The Discipline*, and using “the quadrilateral” to do it!

## SERMON THOUGHTS

The point here is not to incite rebellion against the Scriptures or the best of church tradition. Nor is it to affirm the use of experience and reason to justify any whim of human thought or behavior.

The point is to illustrate from the Biblical tradition itself the dynamic nature of the Holy Spirit of God and that Spirit's work within the Body of Christ. It is a work that is ongoing and continues to surprise and shock and challenge – and redeem and transform – with the goal of establishing on the earth what Jesus called “the Kingdom of God”.

The question this begs of each of us is, “To what extent are we partners with the Spirit in ministry”, as is illustrated in today's text? Or have we gotten it backwards and, rather, view the Spirit as being partnered with us in our ministry?

Asked another way, is the fruit of partnership with the Spirit apparent in our lives and in the life of our church? Or have we grown so accustomed to the fruit of our own vines that we will prefer it to anything new shooting up in the vineyard of the Lord?

## TRANSITION to COMMUNION

Even before the Holy Spirit began turning the faith community upside down, Jesus was busy doing the same. The celebration of Holy Communion is life-giving example. In it, Jesus – according to the synoptic Gospel tradition: Mark, Matthew, and Luke – transformed the traditional celebration of Passover into a remembrance of Himself! Were He not the incarnate Son of God, it would have been the blasphemy of blasphemies. As He was, it was the transformation of one worship tradition of extraordinary power into another.

Let us celebrate that now.

(\*On to the celebration of Holy Communion\*)