

“They Called a Meeting”

Acts 15:1-11

4th Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville

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As I hope you’ve noticed in your bulletin, new members are joining Westminster later today/going to be welcomed in this service. And one of the questions that we always try to cover in our New Member class is what’s required for membership at Westminster.

There are only two requirements.

Do you know what they are?

Baptism...and a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

That’s it.

That’s all that’s required to join Westminster.

Now, after saying that, there are also a few other things that we try to make clear in a New Member Class.

We talk about our vision: Open Minds Open Hearts.

We talk about our pillars and our goals.

We also try to be clear that as an expression of our vision and our values at Westminster, members who are part of the LGBTQ community are ordained here, can get married here, and that this is an important part of who we are at Westminster. We know it’s not that way at every church, which is why it’s important to be clear about who we are at this church.

We talk about the importance of pledging to the church.

We talk about ways that new members can get connected in our church.

So while there are only two requirements for membership, there are also values that we hold dear at Westminster. And people who join our church need to know that too.

Everyone still with me?
Two requirements for membership.
Particular values that we hold dear.

Why do I bring this up?

Because I have another question for you.
It's an imaginary scenario.

And I need to be very clear that this is NOT me telling you that what I'm about to ask you is going to happen, or that I'm even in the back of my mind, considering trying to make this happen.

I just want you to ask yourself the following question.

If I talked the Session into *installing a screen* in our sanctuary...how many of you would send me a disgruntled email?

Don't raise your hand.
Just consider how important NO SCREENS is to you.

Is it a requirement for your membership?
Is it a value you hold dear?

Do you think there might be differing opinions in this room about how important taking a NO SCREENS stance is to the future of Westminster?

I'm asking you to think about this particular question—a screen in the sanctuary—not because it's going to happen, not because I want it to happen.

I just want you to imagine the debate such an issue could cause here at Westminster, and if you can do that, then you're ready to explore our text and topic for today.

We are in the midst of an Easter sermon series, “Then and Now.”

What does the early church [back then] have to teach those of us in the church [right now]?

And our topic for today is growth.

And our text for today is about growth.

According to the book of Acts, the early church was growing.

Not only in numbers, but in its relationship with God.

What it meant to be God's people.

What it meant to be God's church.

And the primary controversy in the early church was NOT over screens...the controversy was over who God was bringing into God's church.

Gentiles.

People with no familiarity of Jewish customs or Jewish practices.

So besides baptism, besides confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior...what would be required of these Gentile members?

That was the question.

Do you know how the early church decided this issue?
 The same way we would decide the issue.
 They called a meeting of the leaders of the church.

It was a big deal.
 Paul was there.
 Peter was there.
 James, the brother of Jesus, was there.

Lots of other apostles and elders were there, and verse 5 in our text describes the scene:

“...some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them [i.e., the Gentile believers] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.’”

What’s required to be a member?
 What’s a cherished value?
 What’s a preference, one that you have but you can let it go if need
 be...?

You see, our topic for today is growth.

And Westminster is very fortunate...we are one of the few churches in our denomination that is experiencing steady growth. But membership growth is not the kind of growth that I’d like you to consider today.

I’m wondering:
 How do we grow in our relationship with God?
 How do we grow in our relationships with one another?

What does the early church have to teach us about this kind of growth?

I think the first lesson from the early church is this:

#1: God is NOT in the business of creating a comfortable church. God is not in the business of creating a church where everyone shows up and agrees with everything that gets decided. God is not in the business of validating every assumption we have, but wants to overturn some of our assumptions about church. There's something about church, about being Christ's body, that's supposed to take each of us OUT OF our comfort zones.

For example...

Years ago, I was interviewing for the pastor position at another church. And this church had a practice, during worship, of inviting children forward for Children's Time before the sermon.

Let me pause...and remind everyone that we cannot do that here.

We have WAY too many children to do a children's time here. Nor do we have enough time in worship to do a children's time here.

Here we have Children's Church here, for our K5 and 1st graders. It's a wonderful ministry, an important way for children to learn about what it means to be in worship.

That's the way we do it at Westminster.

But the church at which I interviewed all those years ago was 1/7 the size of Westminster. Not nearly the same number of children. No children's church.

But they had a children's time in worship.
It was started by the interim pastor.
It was a BIG HIT!

Now I was not used to doing children's time in worship.

So when I interviewed for the job, I said that if I was offered their pastor position, I had no plans to keep children's time in worship.

And that committee looked at me.

And they smiled at me.

And they said, "Ben, if we call you to be our pastor, you are doing children's time in worship!"

Now this was 20 years ago, but I still have vivid memories of my first forays into this uncharted territory for me...there was the day that I was trying to act out the text with those kids, and as I led the children up the chancel steps, I walked by the communion table, and as I was waving my arms for some reason I can't remember, there was an audible GASP from the congregation.

Why?

Because I was too close to the candles on the table...and my robe nearly caught on fire!

Look, leading Children's Time in worship, I made any number of rookie mistakes.

But I also learned some things along the way.

After a few years I learned how to talk with children about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I was not so good at that when I began.

I got better as the years went by.

In other words, that congregation gave me a gift that I didn't even know I needed.

And I grew.

What's your tolerance for being UNCOMFORTABLE in church?

I'm not talking about bringing in a screen.

I'm thinking...what about the next time Lauren or an elder in our children's ministry asks you to help with Children's Church or to teach Sunday School for our children?

Or what if Mary Kathleen asks you to go with our youth as an adult advisor on a mission trip?

What if Leigh asks you to lead a WestConnect group?
Or Marlon invites you to sing in one of our choirs?

Will you say—I can't do that.
I'm not comfortable doing that.
I'm sure someone else will do that.

Or will you say...hmmm, I wonder if this is the way that God is calling me to grow?

You see, our topic this morning is growth.
Not numerical growth.
Spiritual growth.

And spiritual growth, most of the time, does not occur on our own,
BY OURSELVES.

That's the second thing that the early church teaches us about growth.

It often takes place in community.

With people who are willing, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians long ago, to speak the truth to us in love.

I have a vivid memory from my first church of the time I offended a member of the church by doing something I didn't know I had even done wrong.

He stopped by my office.
He told me what I had done.
He told me why it hurt him.
And he left.

I admit, I was wounded.
In fact, I started harboring a grudge against him.
But about a year later, he made another appointment.
And he apologized for how he had said what he had said.

And I felt about this big...because he had let go of his pride, and I was still clinging tightly to my grudge.

But I'll tell you what.
I remembered what he told me.
And I never made that mistake again.

Even though I didn't want to hear it, he spoke the truth in love to me.

And it helped me grow.

What do you think?

Are we ever too old, or too educated, or too stubborn, or too anything to grow in our relationships with one another in here, and what it means to be God's children, out there?

Just this week, I needed to call our mortgage company. Due to hail damage last year, we finally had our roof replaced last month.

The check from our insurance company arrived in the mail. But it wasn't just made out to me and my wife. It was also made out to the mortgage company.

So I called the mortgage company to learn what I needed to do to get them to endorse it, so we could endorse it, so we could pay for the roof.

Now I was on a tight timeline that morning.

And when the woman on the other end of the line answered, she asked what I needed.

I told her.

She said she could help me, but while she was getting ready to do so, would I like to consider borrowing money from the equity we had in our home...

I didn't have time for that!

No, I said, very firmly.

I just need to know where to send this check.

I can help you with that, she said.

And then once again, she started reading from a script, and a SECOND time she tried to offer me the opportunity to borrow money against our equity...

And this time, I didn't just say no.
I barked at her.
I cut her off, raised my voice, and spoke to her in a not-so-kind way.

And she said ok, thank you.
And she transferred me to the correct department.

My first thought when I hung up the phone was who has time for that nonsense? I can't stand it when someone starts wasting my time like that!

And my second thought was...what if that was just the job that she had been trained to do?

What if she didn't have a choice?

What if that call was being monitored, and that script she was reading was what she had been instructed to read, ask about home equity at least two times, and now she's putting up with this bozo, barking at her on the phone...

Maybe if she doesn't read the script and say what she says, maybe she loses her job. Maybe that job is what's keeping her and her family afloat.

Who knows.

What I do know is that after five minutes of being off the phone, I had a second thought...

I still have room to grow.

When it comes to treating every child of God with kindness, with grace, with dignity...I still swing and miss...which means I still have room to grow.

Do you know what else the early church has to teach us about growth?

Not only DISCOMFORT.
Not only COMMUNITY.

We grow because of the grace of the risen Christ.

How many of you believe that the risen Christ is alive and at work in your life right now?

Good.

I believe the risen Christ is giving you the wisdom you need in your life right now. I believe Christ is surrounding you with his love and grace right now.

I'm also confident that right now,
this very day,
the risen Christ is asking something of you.

It's the third goal of our church.
One word.
Begins with a "g"....

(Amen.)