

I Can't Hear You!

On Sunday, we continued our sermon series on "How To Neighbor." We considered how the story taught in Acts 15 might inform our response to racial tension in our culture today.

1. Warm up question: As you look back over your life, when did you first form a friendship with someone of a different race? How did that friendship affect you?
2. The earliest churches were filled with ethnically Jewish people. Because Jesus had lived and ministered in his own Jewish culture, naturally his earliest followers were almost all Jewish. As those followers spread out across the Roman Empire, they found it easiest to share their message with those who were like them, i.e., fellow Jews dispersed across the Roman Empire. Eventually, though, Gentiles also wanted to be part of the Jesus movement. The result was racial and cultural tension in the early churches. Basically, Gentiles were told, "You're welcome, but only if you learn to live, act, and think just like we do, including keeping all the detailed cultural laws of Moses." This tension finally reached its climax at the Church in Antioch. Read Acts 14:26-15:20.
 - a. Verse 2 tells us that the Church in Antioch experienced "no small dissension and debate" over the Gentile question. What visual image is conjured by the phrase "no small dissension and debate?" Describe what you picture happening in the Antioch Church?
 - b. How do you imagine the Gentiles felt? How do you imagine the Jews felt?
3. The Church in Antioch appealed to the apostles in Jerusalem to settle their dispute. Verse 6 says the apostles and the elders convened a meeting that also generated "much debate" – everybody talking, everybody arguing, nobody listening. But then Peter stood up, encouraged everyone take a deep breath, then yielded the floor to Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas didn't argue theology or politics. Verse 12 says they simply shared their experience, telling stories about the wonderful ways God was moving in the hearts of the Gentiles while "the whole assembly kept silence and listened." **From this we drew our first key lesson for how we today should respond to racial tension: we must listen deeply to each other, with open hearts.**
 - a. To illustrate "deep listening" Jeff showed a video where Shellye and Spencer recounted a conversation they had. Spencer was upset with the phrase "white privilege." He felt safe sharing that Shellye, and instead of reacting in an accusatory way, Shellye listened and gently explained her perspective, allowing Spencer to break through to a whole new level of understanding. Let's practice that same kind of listening together. When you hear the phrase "white privilege," how does that feel to you? What's your understanding of that concept?
 - b. Our black and brown brothers and sisters keep telling us, "You don't understand. Our experiences are different from yours," especially when it comes to policing.

To illustrate, Joann Rohlman shared a story about an unnerving encounter she and her son had with a police officer one night in Indianapolis when rushing to the hospital after her husband had a medical emergency. How did Joann's story affect you? What thoughts or feelings did it evoke?

4. **The second lesson we learned from Acts 15 is: Speak carefully, using words designed to bring healing, rather than further inflaming tension.** In Acts 15, instead of denouncing or accusing their opponents, Paul and Barnabas simply shared their experiences. In the same vein, Jeff asked Pastor Vivian to share how recent news stories about police shootings, and police being shot, have affected her. She told how hurtful it is when people hug and love on her on Sunday, but then go on Facebook and say inflammatory and insensitive things. How did you feel about what Vivian shared? How should we conduct ourselves on Facebook?
5. Jeff also emphasized the importance of listening to police officers with our hearts, and being careful with our words for their sake too. He invited us to imagine how we would feel if a police officer in our congregation – someone like Jennifer Barnes – were shot by a sniper, like happened in Dallas.
 - a. If Jennifer were shot by an angry sniper, how would you feel?
 - b. Jeff shared a story from Jennifer about a time a black driver accused her of stopping him because he was black, even though Jennifer had not been able to see the driver until she walked up to his car. Why do you think the black driver said what he did? How do you think Jennifer felt?
 - c. Jeff said, “We don’t have to make a choice between loving people of color and loving good police officers.” Do you agree or disagree – and why?
6. **The third lesson we learn from Acts 15 is the importance of self-examination.** In Acts 15, the Jewish Christians examined themselves and decided they needed to make changes to be more welcoming of Gentiles. Jared Hancock and Shellye Bradford each shared stories about times when they realize stereotypes and prejudice had affected how they reacted to people. As you look inside yourself, do you feel you have work to do on racial matters? Can you think of times when stereotypes and prejudice have affected how you responded to someone different than yourself?
7. LifeJourney is one of our city’s most multicultural congregations. Racial tension within American culture can also inflame tension within our church. Satan would like nothing better than to divide us over matters of race. There are people who’ve even left our church because we talk about matters of race.
 - a. Would you rather be in a church where everybody was alike?
 - b. How can we best foster unity within our church in the midst of racial tension in our culture?