

Just Like Them
Acts 15:11

[Note in the Scripture, that Paul and Barnabas travel through Phoenicia, a Gentile land, and also Samaria. Samaritans had long been considered deficient in their faith and were despised by "righteous" folks.]

Samuel Goldwyn, of MGM fame, was known for his sayings that were a little, well, off. One saying was: "I don't want "yes men." I want people who will tell me the truth. Even if I fire them." But more to our point is his saying when he was presented with an idea for a new movie. He didn't like the idea, so he said. "Gentlemen, Include me out."

I wonder if through the centuries the church has been too concerned itself with including people out of the salvation story.

It's almost as if Jesus' invitation is simply too radical. We can't stand the thought that people we don't agree with might be included in the grace of salvation.

There is a sad irony in our Scripture. That within a generation of Jesus' proclaiming a new kingdom, folks were trying to water it down. Let me explain.

In Greek, the word for healing and salvation is exactly the same. So, when we see Jesus healing folks, he is offering them salvation. And Jesus proclaimed a wideness in God's mercy; he

included people in the salvation story that others long ago had written off.

The blind. Lepers. Gentiles. Roman Soldiers. Tax collectors. Every day sinners. A woman caught in adultery. He told stories about a young man who throws it all away, yet is welcomed home by a waiting father. He told stories about a Samaritan, Samaritans despised by every good religious person, a Samaritan who proved himself to be a true child of God by offering mercy and compassion to a stranger. He invited every one to sing the salvation song.

And he chastised those who would keep them from singing it. Pharisees frustrated him immensely, because they knew so much law, but knew so little grace. Preached so well about keeping commandments, but so little about God's gracious love for the lost and the least.

Well, it was all a bit much to take. And the trouble begins when Paul gets religion.

He gets religion and starts saying that no matter what their background, folks who believe in Jesus are welcome in the kingdom, welcome in the church, and welcome into the eternal fellowship of heaven.

And so here it is, in the Book of Acts, that the church first begins to try to put a wall around salvation.

Paul, how dare you preach that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is not sufficient for us to enter

into a new relationship with God? One simply cannot come to Christ just as she is, just as he is. To demand that the men be circumcised is a short hand way of demanding that people must first take upon themselves the traditions and the law of how it was done in the past.

Now, Acts understates the matter just a little. "After no small discussion" really means that the church threatened to split over the matter. We know Paul was no shrinking violet. We can imagine that there were harsh words exchanged, but nothing was settled.

So, it was decided to have a conference in Jerusalem to decide the matter.

What must one do to be saved? Is the cross enough? Or must there also be adherence to the entire Jewish law? Is salvation a gift from God, or is it something we must earn by adhering to principles of diet and what clothes to wear and what ceremonies to attend?

In Jerusalem, Paul finds an ally in Peter, who is eloquent and persuasive. He says, the very reason for Christ's sacrifice is that the religious people had been unable to live up to the demands of the law. Why, then, place this demand once again upon those who come to know Christ?

And then Peter cuts to the heart of the matter: we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Folks, this statement is of monumental importance. Because in any age there are those who

declare themselves closer to God than others. And those from the wonderful moral, ethical, and religious foundation of the Old Testament faith, thought they were just a little closer to God than the immoral Pagans who had come to believe in Christ.

But the deeper truth is more important still: When we sing, *Amazing Grace* that saved a wretch like me, we make no distinction between good wretch and bad wretch. Or to put it another way: we must be very careful before we decide whom to include out of the salvation story.

But the history of the church is precisely this. We try to say who and who cannot receive this grace.

We like to believe that the Pilgrims came to America for the sake of religious freedom. Indeed not. They came to live out their religion and then included out all those who did not agree. Did not just kick them out of church, but out of the colony, and by implication, out of heaven itself.

One of those kicked out was Roger Williams, a Baptist. He went to Rhode Island to live out salvation as he understood it. And then guess what? He found some Quakers there, didn't like what they were saying, so tried to banish all the Quakers from Rhode Island. And so it goes.

During the Vietnam War, some self-righteous Christians proclaimed that if you fought in the war or were not against the war, then you had no place in God's kingdom. Imagine coming home from war and finding Christian people mocking you.

In the current war, something of the opposite is happening. Some Christians say that if you do not support the war, that if you do not, as it were, believe that Christ bleeds not just red, but red, white and blue, then your faith is suspect and you are included out.

Some churches would deny your salvation if you read anything but the King James Bible or if you have a different view of Biblical authority than others. Some churches would deny you communion if you have divorced and then have remarried or in one recent situation, if you support the wrong presidential candidate.

And when we dare to decide for ourselves whom to include out, then we are denying the grace of Jesus Christ and declaring that the power of the cross, is, well, not so powerful after all.

St. Paul's great vision was to see in every other person a person for whom Christ died upon the cross.

So, where does all this leave us?

It leaves us at least here. From the beginning, the Methodist way of experiencing Christianity has been to extend this grace of Jesus Christ to all peoples. Beyond doctrinal or social or political disagreements, we have always found unity in trusting that the Spirit of Christ lives in others as the Spirit lives within ourselves. Now, this is not to say that the Methodist perspective is the only perspective. But it is our perspective and it is supported by Scripture.

What is on our front sign rings true for Methodists: every saint has a past, every sinner a future.

Sometimes this perspective leads other churches to complain that we are wishy-washy. That we do not take firm stands on various issues. My reply is that we take a firm stand on this: that *we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.*

No matter who "they" might be. The soldier, no less and no more than the war protestor will be saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. We include neither out.

For you see, the final word of a church must never be a theological or political or social stand or even moral stand. It is never enough for the church to stand up and be counted on this or that issue: the firm stand must always be: how might we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to this person or this group?

We strive to be holiness. But true holiness always ends with an invitation, for folks to experience life in a new way through the mercy, the spirit, the forgiveness, the welcome, of Jesus Christ.

The Methodist Church is against folks living together as husband and wife when they are not married. But such folks are welcome to come worship, because where else will they hear the good news? And we open our church to weddings, because if the church cannot celebrate a new direction, and making proper improper relationships, then where else will folks come to experience such grace?

The Methodist Church is against abortion, except in those cases where life conflicts with life. But to women who have had an abortion, we offer counsel, and love and acceptance, because we *believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.*" We will not include them out.

The Methodist Church is against war, except as a tragic necessity. But we offer chaplains and we pray for our national leaders even if our leaders make decisions with which we disagree, and we honor our fighting men and women, because we honor their commitment. And, at our best, Methodists who support the war, pray for those who oppose the war, because we trust we *believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.*"

The Methodist Church is against crime. But we visit prisons and jails, because we *believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.*"

Now, let's be careful here. To believe in the grace of Jesus Christ does not mean we are then free to live sinful lives. No, and this is for another sermon, to believe in the grace of Jesus Christ is to believe that His spirit empowers us to live holy lives, to live lives of welcome and invitation that make the Christian life seem wonderful, and good.

As I said, Christians we are called to live holy lives, but true holiness never stops and condemnation, but always with invitation, invitation to accept the grace of Jesus Christ. But our invitation is always to everyone.

A final story. I served a church once outside Elizabeth City and performed the marriage of a couple who had divorced other people and had lived together. One man in the church did not like it one bit, and told me so in no uncertain terms. My observation that the task of the church is to offer grace to sinners, fell on deaf ears. He, of course, made sure everyone knew his anger. He wanted to include them out.

But then, some months later, he came to me. Could his daughter get married in the church? It had to be quick, she was already four months pregnant. I said, of course.

When the wedding was announced, and folks knew what was going on, the matriarch of the church came to me. Prim. Proper. Wanted to talk about the wedding. Here goes, I thought.

And she started in. She's very young, her fiancé doesn't have much of a job, and they have a baby on the way. And they're going to get married in the church.

But then she got to the purpose of her visit. She asked, don't you think the church should also throw them a baby shower?