

**What Works is Love**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
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*Acts 15:1-12*

We've all come across people who want to share their "wisdom" with us. Maybe they know the best way to get your baby to sleep through the night or your teenager to stop piling their dirty laundry on the floor. They know how you should look and how you can get there, with a special diet or a new exercise regimen or the right hair and beauty products.

I'm still waiting for someone to tell me how I can be more productive so get my sermons written by dinner time on Thursday every week!

This kind of advice is generally well-meaning, and can even helpful... sometimes. But often it's not. Because my kids are different from their kids. And my body type, age, metabolism and standards of beauty are different from theirs.

And my ability to fill my to-do list with things I should be counting on others to do cannot be cracked by their time management hacks!

It could be human nature to believe that whatever has worked for *me* will also work for *you*.

Circumcision had "worked" for the Jewish followers of Jesus for thousands of years, so they assumed it would "work" for the Gentiles as well.

Paul and Barnabas, however, disagree. Probably because these two actually know some Gentiles. They understand what a burden circumcision would be for adult men. What worked for the Jews won't necessarily work for the Gentiles.

It was an important enough conflict for the early church in Antioch that they sent a delegation to headquarters in Jerusalem to try and settle it once and for all.

The elders had to decide whether to stretch and include Gentiles as they are, or create 2 levels of membership: Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian.

The tension morphed to outright verbal conflict, with everyone picking their side.

I know from experience that some measure of disagreement between people can be healthy. When conflict is managed from a place of love and respect, it can change things. Reconciliation has a sacred quality when it helps us to restore relationships. Friendships can heal. Partnerships can be strengthened.

On the other hand, it is also possible for conflict to become entrenched, abusive, long lasting and soul crushing. And transforming THAT can sometimes feel darn near impossible.

I wonder some days if there is something in our humanity that requires us to have someone to disagree with?

Jesus taught that humanity could expand beyond their conflict into a place of justice, peace, and love.

But it's not JUST Jesus of Nazareth who taught this. Most major world religions try to get us to step out of the cycle of hating others. It's not an easy task for those of us who haven't yet reached the Buddha's enlightened state, or felt something of Jesus' personal connection to the Creator, or Gandhi's inward peace that led him to undertake effective non-violent protest.

This "*love your enemies*" thing that Jesus talks about so much is difficult.

Love your enemies... it means you see their humanity at its core and understand that we all share something in common, even if it is not our ideology. It means loving their humanity so that together you might collaborate on bringing God's kin-dom to reality.

Collaboration can only happen after we see the simple similarities we can agree on. Of course, this means that both must be willing to even sit in the same room together before we can ask each other: what do we share, what is it about you that is the same in me?

The work of figuring out how to be faithful is hard, it's not a solo gig. An important part of the church's role is to help the community figure out what it means to be faithful in a particular place at a particular time. We might take the principles used by church leaders at this Jerusalem Council and apply them as we work together to figure out what it looks like to follow Jesus today.

First off, Paul and Barnabas enthusiastically shared stories of how the Spirit was acting in their ministry, and Peter and others listened. We can pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is doing in our world and honor that holy activity. Who is God speaking through? What is God doing? How can we participate? What is our role in the holy movements happening today like creation care and transformative justice and church vitality?

Also, James looked to scripture to understand how the current movement they felt to include Gentiles was, in fact, faithful to the Word of God throughout history. People have quoted scripture to justify a multitude of evils. As church, part of our work is to insist upon faithful biblical interpretations. How do we read the rest of the Bible through the lens of Jesus' teachings?

Finally, the Jerusalem Council shows that this work of figuring out faithfulness is best done in community. Are we listening to each other's stories? Are we seeking out voices beyond our walls? What does obedience to God look like for us right now?

And when we get it wrong—because we will—how can we encourage each other to re-evaluate and try again—together?

Perhaps as we enter a new post-COVID season of being church together, we might take time to consider what this season has taught us about what REALLY makes us church.

Just as people give advice on child-rearing and diet and time management, there is no shortage of suggestions on how to do church during COVID. Tips on Zooming and live streaming and preaching to the screen and social media engagement... heck, I've even coached some colleagues about what we've done here at MCC that might work in their context.

Some of that advice proves to be helpful, and some of it does not work at all. Perhaps we'll learn to honor the things that will vary from setting to setting, from COVID time to non-COVID time.

And maybe we'll learn to focus on the deeper levels, the underlying principles of what it means to be a faithful community: in all that we do, however we pivot to do it, we strive to worship God with our whole hearts, pay attention to the Holy Spirit, follow Christ, and remain in community with each other.

Our human tendency toward division is strong, but the roots of God's love are stronger. Through the power of the gospel, we come together as one, forever changed by the experience of God's grace. Once we were strangers, but now we know that through God's mercy, we can treat one another as sisters and brothers.

And because we have received mercy, it is incumbent upon us to show mercy to others. Like Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James insisted, we have been freed to love.

Maybe love doesn't make our differences and disagreements go away, but it allows us to hear each other, despite them. The God who called us out of depths and into the light, empowers us to be a place and a people to take just this on. Amen.