

This story is like driving your car at night? You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. As Jesus ascended into heaven he told the apostles in Acts 1, that they would be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). The word of God certainly spreads to the ends of the earth yet the road to the ends of the earth was not visible all at once. With only the available light, the apostles must make decisions about the direction of the church’s witness. The story of the Jerusalem council, that we read in Acts 15, tells how the light of the apostles’ experiences and their reading of Scripture combine in such a way that they recognize God’s mercy extending to Gentiles, to non-Jews.

This is of particular interest to those of us who are unable to tell the future. It is like Yogi Barra said, “I avoid making predictions, especially when it is about the future.” The apostles couldn’t see the end of the road, they were using the light they had to figure the way forward. This is what we do in our lives, this is what Maddie and Justin are doing as they say, “Yes!” to their faith and affirm the promises made in their baptism. We as a congregation seek to follow that road Jesus spoke of, being witnesses in Jerusalem, our neighborhood; in Judea the wider community; in Samaria, beyond our region and to the ends of the earth. So how did the early apostles figure out what to do? How did they discern God’s call?

Chapter 14 of Acts closes with Paul and Barnabas among the believers in Antioch, a city in present day Turkey near the Syrian boarder. Through Paul and Barnabas God has been bringing Gentiles, non-Jews, to faith. Paul and

Barnabas are sharing this news with the churches and there is great joy. But then some teachers arrive from Judea, the area around Jerusalem, saying Gentiles need to follow all of the Law, they need to become Jewish in order to be Christian. For us, 2000 years later, the answer seems obvious. But hindsight is 20/20, it seems obvious looking back, but Jesus was a Jew and the earliest Christian communities were Jews steeped in Jewish scripture and tradition. This story gives us insight into the process the early church used to see the road forward—They used 4 steps: broaden the conversation, challenge assumptions, value experience, experience is confirmed by Scripture. So Maddie and Justin, and really all of us as we make decisions about our lives and our callings, we can use these four steps to help see the road forward.

First, broaden the conversation.# The early church had a big decision to make, they talked about it amongst individuals, then the local church, finally with the apostles in Jerusalem. When you have an important decision, reach out to people you trust. For Maddie and Justin that is people like: mom and dad, someone here at church or a trusted teacher. This is what I call my personal board of directors—they are people that know me and my strengths and they will tell me the truth whether I like it or not, they hold me accountable to God’s calling for me.

The second thing the early church did was challenge their assumptions. Sometimes the way forward comes from realization that long-standing differences don’t hold true anymore. The apostles had always believed that the world was divided into two kinds of people: Jews and

Gentiles, us and them. In his speech Peter works to overcome the “us” and “them” divisions—the Jews who believe in Jesus, believe that they are saved, not by keeping the Law, but by “the grace of the Lord Jesus.” That it true for Gentiles also. We must challenge our assumptions. Example: Kimberly-Clark is a company founded in 1872 and for about 110 years it was a business paper company with a number of paper mills around the world. By the 80’s, then CEO, Darwin Smith, realized there was no future growth in paper mills, the business that had sustained them for their long history, they challenged the assumption, that they are a paper mill company, and Kimberly-Clark sold the mills and poured all the capital in the their consumer paper products. Scott Paper was the giant in that industry and by 1995 they purchased Scott. We must challenge our assumptions.

Third, experience counts. After Peter’s speech, Barnabas and Paul tell about what has been happening in their ministry non-Jews coming to faith. “The proof is in the pudding,” or “that dog barks.” It is about examining the reality or truth of our current situation. Does the decision you are thinking about making have a precedent, has it worked else where.

Finally, experience is confirmed by Scripture. James affirms what Peter said and Paul/Barnabas’ experiences showed, with the words of the prophet Amos. Spending time in the Bible is important. For the last two years at the beginning of Peace’s council meetings we have listened to God’s word—we have read scripture and then been silent, taking time for God to speak to us through the word, opening ourselves to what God is doing in the

text and calling us to, in the world, through the verses. Set your mind on Jesus—it can be as simple as having scripture be your first breath when you wake. Instead of all you have to do or didn’t do the day before—breath deeply saying to yourself, “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want,” or “The Lord is my light and salvation. Whom shall I fear?” There are lots of verses, find one and use it as centering prayer throughout your day, before a test or interview or difficult conversation. This isn’t about WWJD, (What Would Jesus do?) but WIJD... what is Jesus doing? Being a Christian isn’t about imitating Jesus... rather opening ourselves to what Jesus is already doing in our lives and in the world.

Two-thousand years ago the church decided on the basis of human experience and the witness of Scripture that they had been the beneficiaries of the wideness of God’s love and they recognized Jesus at work extending that mercy. God continues to be at work in our world and in our lives doing justice and loving mercy. Jesus holds you, comforts you, surrounds you with a loving community and God places strengths within you that our community and world needs. It is like driving your car at night, you can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. Jesus is our light. God is calling us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Giving us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that Jesus’ light is leading us and God’s love supporting us. Amen.