

What God Is Doing
Acts 15:1-18
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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James Milner was a Scotsman and a good Presbyterian. He divided his time between Virginia and North Carolina and he is remembered today mainly because he was the first employer of John Chavis. John Chavis worked in his Virginia home, where his law practice was located.

Best anyone can guess, it was while he was working for lawyer Milner that John first began to demonstrate his remarkable intellectual abilities. No one doubts that it was in that law library that John laid the groundwork for his future studies.

After three years in the Army during the American Revolution, he made his living as a tutor, attended a Presbyterian church, and eventually was accepted into the private religious studies program at the Theological School of New Jersey. The Presbyterian pastor who was training him was John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. When Witherspoon died, Chavis transferred to Liberty Hall Academy in Virginia, the school now known as Washington and Lee University.

All through this time, it was said of him that God was moving in the mind and heart of John Chavis. His sermons might tend to the intellectual, but he had a heart for the Gospel. After he graduated with high honors, the Lexington Presbytery didn't debate too long before ordaining him. Oh, there were plenty of folks who looked askance, but they could see what God was doing in this teacher who was also a preacher.

But this wasn't supposed to happen. It had never happened before. You should probably know John Chavis was, best we can tell, born in the West Indies, and his time in lawyer Milner's house and office was as an indentured servant. He was the first black man to graduate from an American university and the first be ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church. In 1832, racist laws would strip him of the right to preach and teach and his mysterious death six years later has been attributed to his public anti-slavery speeches. But throughout his life it was said of him that the racist Presbytery of Lexington, Virginia couldn't deny what God was doing in and through John Chavis.

Rachel was the quintessential preacher's kid. Her father, Rev. James Henry Henderlite, was one who spent his entire career arguing for the reunification of the Southern and Northern churches of the Presbyterian Church. Like a good Presbyterian, he made sure his children were well educated, sending Rachel to Mary Baldwin College in Virginia. She quickly outgrew their programs and transferred to Agnes Scott College, just about five blocks from where I went to seminary in Decatur, Georgia. She graduated with honors despite having to sit out two semesters with tuberculosis. Wanting to provide academic support for her father's efforts at reunification, she studied theology at the New York Theological Seminary.

When she graduated, she did what most women with theological degrees in the 1950s did; she became a teacher. And within a couple of years she was hired to serve on the National Board of Education of the Southern Church, drafting curriculum for adults and children, and eventually creating the Covenant Life Curriculum, the longest published Presbyterian Bible Curriculum of the 20th century. Rachel was doing great things, including working to bridge racial divides in her native Richmond, where she settled after seminary studies.

As a part of that reconciliation work, she helped found the All Souls Presbyterian Church in Richmond as one of the first predominantly African-American churches in the southern church, something that made her father proud, but which didn't go down so well in his all-white congregation.

Still, it was hard to deny that God was working in Rachel's life – in the way she taught, and in the way she brought people together. And so the people of All Souls sought to ordain her as a Minister of Word and Sacrament to be, some said, their missionary to the white Southern Presbyterian church.

But it wasn't supposed to happen – because this was the south, and it was 1965, and nothing like this had ever happened before. Oh, it had happened in the northern church 10 years before. But now, in Richmond, in the heart of the old south, a black church ordained a white pastor's kid as the first woman minister in the Southern Presbyterian Church. Every year for the rest of her life, though, she would receive a post card from one of the men who loudly protested at the Presbytery vote on her ordination. The post card always said the same thing "The ordination of women is a grievous sin because it says in the Bible: 'Let women keep silent in the churches.'"

Why am I telling these two stories of John and Rachel? Because the church has been struggling against itself from the very beginning – with tradition, with the way it's always been, with faithful people who have strong convictions that God has spoken about this group or that group and has said, "No, they don't lead; no, they don't get freedom; no, they don't have the right to marry; no, they don't have the right to full membership."

And when I say from the beginning, I mean from the VERY beginning. The Council of Jerusalem, best we can figure, took place within 20 years of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, and it made the most important decision of the early church. The question was, must you be a Jew first in order to become a part of the community called the Way, that branch of Judaism that followed the risen Christ?

It was the natural progression of the great stories of the Book of Acts that predate this one. Peter has a dream where he is told that no one is unclean and he ends up baptizing a Roman military official and his household. Philip is sent to the Eunuch. Paul and Barnabas are preaching in Antioch and most of the people showing up aren't members of the synagogue there. What are they to do with these folks? After all, there are, according to tradition, 613 laws contained in the Torah – everything from circumcision to how kosher animals were to be slaughtered – and it has always been assumed that to be a part of the community, to be a follower of Jesus, the Jewish Rabbi from Galilee, you had to be a Jew.

And how do they decide? The same way the Presbytery in Lexington decided with John, the same way the All Souls Church decided in Richmond – they see what God is doing; they celebrate what God is doing; and that means they recognize the gifts of the Spirit in John even though some of that day questioned whether black people even had souls. It means they recognize the leadership qualities of Rachel even though many still believed the pulpit was reserved for men.

The gathered leaders at the Jerusalem Council heard Peter tell of the Spirit falling on a man who was, some believed, their oppressor, their sworn enemy – of how God had brought Peter to Cornelius' household to teach and to baptize. They heard Paul and Barnabas speak of all they had seen – of the fervent faith and faithful lives of Gentiles across what is now Syria and Lebanon.

Despite their misgivings, despite their fears, despite the clear language of the law of the Old Testament, they said: "We have no choice but to acknowledge what God is doing, how God is at work in these lives." And so the handful of leaders in Jerusalem made a decision that allowed the Gospel to spread to Turkey, to Greece, to Rome, to the Gauls in Galatia, who eventually end up moving west, their name shifting from Gauls to Celts.

Seeing what God was doing and getting out of the way led directly to the Christian church, even today, being the largest cultural influence and the largest religious body the world has ever known.

When James, the voice of tradition, stands up and says, we must do this – he does so quoting from the Prophet Amos. Amos is not generally quoted much, certainly not in a joyful, celebratory way like here. The book of Amos is one long tirade against the nations of his day – Israel Bad, Judah Bad, Babylon Bad, Assyrians Bad, Egypt Bad. But, at the close of his book, after announcing destruction on all of these nations, Amos says: "But God says – you will not see me in the midst of the destruction...but after this you will see my return...and I will rebuild the covenant I made with David...which is left in ruins...so that all the world will seek me...even the strangers...even the Gentiles."

And how is it that the people are to learn that this has happened? Well, James seems to be saying: Listen to what Peter and Paul and Barnabas are saying – God is at work in Cornelius; God is at work in the Eunuch; God is at work in the Gentiles in Antioch. And here's where I think this story reaches out to us today...

I'm not sure too many of us need to be reminded that the history of the Gospel is a never-ending story of an ever-widening circle of inclusion, where those who were seen as outsiders or unworthy, by the movement of God, are brought into the beloved community. This is the very nature of progressive protestant theology and of the history of this and many churches. But where I hope it speaks to us this day is where to look for God.

I'll admit that I get nervous when we start talking about God "doing things" in the world. Not because I don't think it's happening, but because I've seen and read of too many times when we've said: God did X to punish this group or that group or God caused that politician to lose or to win.

Did you notice that's not the kind of thing Peter and Paul and Barnabas were talking about? That's not the kind of movement of God that motivated the Lexington Presbytery in the 1700s or the All Souls Church in 1965. No, they all experienced what God was doing by seeing God at work in the life and service of people, particular people.

And so when I say that God is doing wonderful things at Northminster, it's because I see God at work in the way Christopher helps the choir to understand the theological messages they are communicating in the anthems they sing. It's because I see God at work when Ginny heads over for another session of loving and teaching the Syrian family we now call friends. It's because I see God at work in the hands and smiles that prepare and serve soup on Tuesdays and make First Friday lunches and meals for the Night Ministry. It's because I see God at work in Mary's prayerful gathering of volunteers for Family Promise and in the ways Al and Paul and Ned and Ann and so many more are making sure that the week so many will spend in Kentucky is safe and enlightening and faithful.

See what God is doing by seeing how God is at work in so many lives here and all around us. And so our calling is to keep our eyes open as we live and work and love and struggle with one another and with all the insanity that seems to surround us. I guarantee, if you keep looking, you will see God at work in someone. And, if you look around in a particular situation and are struggling to see where grace and love and hope are at work, maybe it's because God is preparing to be at work in you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.