

Advent Lutheran Church
Welcoming Everyone
May 18, 2025
Acts 15:1-18

When I taught religion to undergrad students, I found that nearly all of them were surprised to learn how many Protestant Christian denominations exist today.

As Christians, we have been good at noticing our differences. Rather than overcoming them or finding ways to be in community together despite our differences, we regularly split or splinter.

Sadly, American Christians lead the way and the list of issues over which denominations have split is nearly endless. As a result, we now have more than 200 Protestant denominations.

This tendency to exclude isn't new. Were you listening to this morning's reading? The early church was a growing church and with growth came growing pains.

What exactly should they require of prospective new members, particularly the ones who didn't look like the existing members?

Some folks were getting upset that they were welcoming everyone. How could they stay Lutheran? Ooops. That wasn't their situation. I meant to say how could they retain their Jewishness if they continued welcoming so many Gentiles?

These folks wanted the newcomers to look like they looked. So, they called for the men to be circumcised. They proposed this and other humanly constructed rules in order to make it harder for people to become part of the church.

Thankfully, leaders, including Peter, Paul, and James, stepped up with a counter proposal designed to widen the welcome.

Peter says, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us."¹

¹ Acts 15:8

This moment becomes a turning point. The early church decides they should not make it difficult for Gentiles to join the church.²

The choice to open the doors wide rather than to close them tight is just as important today. Here at Advent our church's purpose includes a call to be a growing church where all are welcome. And our mission is to live and love like Jesus. That means learning from this early example: listening deeply, trusting the Spirit's work in people's lives, and welcoming them just as they are.

Growth doesn't mean just getting bigger, it begins with becoming more like Christ. And Jesus didn't wait for people to change who they were or to start dressing like him before loving them. He welcomed tax collectors, healed outsiders, engaged the marginalized, and called people to follow him and to bring their true and authentic selves to that pursuit.

Living and loving like Jesus means being a community where people can belong before they believe and where transformation happens through grace, not judgment. It means being willing to let go of old expectations that no longer serve God's mission. It means being courageous enough to invite others and to tell them that there is a place for them here.

We are becoming this kind of church. Slowly but surely.

It is my genuine hope and prayer that Advent is and increasingly becomes the church we claim to be.

A church where welcome isn't just a buzzword, but a way of life. A church where no one has to prove their worth to be included. A growing church where love is lived, not merely talked about.

May it be so. And may we all be enriched as we hear and learn from our young people, beginning now with three who will soon graduate from high school.

² Acts 15:19