

EKKLESIA 7-A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
ACTS 15
SEPTEMBER 30, 2018

Six and a half years ago, I stood here as your new pastor and preached my first sermon. I started by showing you a painting by Norman Rockwell.

https://magazine.byu.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2016/01/Rockwell_S460-Lift_Up_Thine_Eyes-e1467056007467.jpg

The picture shows a bunch of city dwellers trudging through their lives as they march down a street in a major city. Meanwhile, a man on a ladder is taking directions from a priest on what message to put on the sign outside the church. It could be a general message, maybe the title of Sunday's sermon, we don't know. The words are simple yet profound, "Lift up thine eyes."

Lift Up Thine Eyes is the title of this painting and there are plenty of ways to interpret it. Many people tend to focus on the idea of the church offering the one true way to abundant and eternal life and the world is just trudging by. Eyes down on the world around them. Eyes down on their own concerns and fears. Eyes down, if only they would look up. If only they would look up, they would find truth and salvation, joy and hope. That being said, the church's job is to help people lift the eyes of the world around them, or so I thought. Today I want to tell you the number one thing you can do as a church and as a Christian if you want to affect the world around you. The most important thing you can do that will change the world around you and it has nothing to do with telling people to lift up their eyes.

This is surreal to say, but this is my final sermon at SFC. I will stop short of saying my final sermon ever, but I have no plans to preach anytime soon. I think I have something to offer today from Acts 15. In a way, this is a strange final sermon because it's about circumcision and meat sacrificed to idols and strangled animals. More than that, it is about the constitution of

the church. It is about who we let in and how we attract new people. With that in mind, it is the perfect sermon to wrap up my calling as your pastor.

Acts 15:1-19

The Gentiles, anyone who wasn't Jewish, were introduced to the gospel very soon after the death of Jesus. The gospel spread in Acts chapter 8 and through the work of church planters and evangelists. The gospel went far beyond the confines of Israel and the Jews. It went throughout Europe. The terms of the deal were simple. There is a God who loves you. You have sinned against him and deserve death. Jesus came as the sinless son of God and died on a cross to take your place for the death you deserved. Three days later he rose again to conquer sin and death so we could not only be forgiven of our sins, but have abundant and eternal life. Pretty simple and straightforward deal. That is the gospel, the good news at its very core.

The deal then started to get messy, complex and hard to understand. Specifically, Jewish Christians started to introduce a gospel-plus deal. Yes, you need Jesus, but you need Jesus-plus. Plus, our rules and laws. You have to become fully Jewish in practice, then you can become fully Christian. They were bullying the Gentiles and excluding them because they did not have historical understanding or practice in the faith.

A key practice that embodies this whole exclusive mentality was circumcision. All the way back to Abraham, God instituted circumcision as an outward sign of an inward change. The men of the community would be surgically altered to portray their changed hearts and their new allegiance.

Now fast forward to 20 years after Jesus' resurrection. People are taking the simple message of Jesus, the deal as it were, and were saying, "You need to be circumcised." In order to receive the gospel, there are preexisting qualifications that you must satisfy. Essentially they are introducing the first gospel-plus version of Jesus. I am guessing the Gentiles felt kind of like

anyone would. I thought it was a done deal, but you are using language from the Old Testament that I don't understand, terms I don't know and asking me to do things I didn't think were important.

Honestly gospel-plus happens a lot today. We have made the simple message of Jesus horribly convoluted. Yes, you need to place your faith in Jesus plus you need to be orthodox, which means your interpretation of scripture has to look just like mine. You need Jesus plus the musical style we think is biblical. You need Jesus plus the vision of church life as we see it. You need Jesus plus abstaining from fill in the blank. You need Jesus plus you must vote this way or boycott these people. Many people are left confused or frustrated because the deal that Jesus made so simple has been hijacked. People in powerful and influential positions began to interpose their preferences as gospel requirements.

The early church had the same problem. Almost 20 years into this movement, the church was becoming full with Jewish and Gentile Christians. A rift was emerging because exclusion was infiltrating the church. The church was becoming a large organization, and when things grow, they gain power and they get messy. As outsiders become insiders, things become difficult. As vagrants and people in need of a savior become power brokers and leaders, things get a bit messier.

In 1959, Norman Rockwell painted something that was prophetic and prescient. The painting was called, *The Jury*. He wrote this at a time when 18 states still did not allow women to serve on juries because their mental acumen wasn't to be believed in a court of law. So you have 11 men hovering over a woman trying to intimidate and coerce her yet she remains steadfast with square shoulders and a straight back. Sound like anything going on in the world today?

The world tends to bend towards power in the long term but justice and inclusivity in the long term. I think that has everything to do with the gospel. Generation after generation, people are confronted with the wild grace of Jesus and the scandalous mercy of God. That he includes and

offers forgiveness. That he elevates the lowly and disempowered. Who gets to be in? What are the requirements to get in?

The issue here is not whether Gentiles can be saved. If you will remember from last week, Peter saw the vision of the animals with the sheet, and then he was led to preach to the Gentile, Cornelius. Cornelius and his Gentile friends and family converted and received the Holy Spirit. This was a clear picture for everyone to see that the Gentiles too could be recipients of God's grace. The issue here is that everyone assumed this was a done deal, but they began to add things on. Specifically, you have to be circumcised.

Now before we set off to demonize this Jewish-Christian group, put yourself in their shoes for a second. They have grown up with a tradition that is some 3,000 years old at this point. They have, through ups and downs, been dedicated to the one true God and following the laws and guidelines he laid down from the beginning. Now things are changing, and they were the things that Jesus did not directly address, at least not in the gospels we have. Jesus came and said love your neighbor, but he made no mention about circumcision. He made no mention of how a 3,000-year-old faith community could enfold pagan, sinful, different Gentiles. They were left to sort it out, and they decided to make it really complicated.

Norman Rockwell painted four paintings illustrating the four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom from fear and the freedom of religion. Here is the wild part, he had to take a couple stabs at the freedom of worship. He ended up with this:

https://www.artbrokerage.com/artthumb/rockwell_89865_3/625x559/Norman_Rockwell_Freedom_of_Religion_1972.jpg

But he started with this:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/c/c2/Freedom_of_Worship_original_draft.jpg/220px-Freedom_of_Worship_original_draft.jpg

The first one was a protestant shaving the beard of a Jewish man while a priest and African American man looked on. The problem? It wasn't clear how they were different. Without clear garb or cultural signs, they just look like four men in a barbershop. What a delightful problem to have.

For the Judaizer (the group of Jewish Christians who were advocating for fulfillment of the law and circumcision), the answer was simple, circumcision, and they had a good argument. Jesus was Jewish. He was circumcised, and he clearly said, "None of the law will pass away. In fact, I came to fulfill the law." The Gentiles had a great counter-argument to circumcision. Ouch, and no, we don't want to do that.

The whole issue of asking grown men to be circumcised in order to be saved completely misses God's original purpose of circumcision. We are going to get graphic on this issue, but I want to illuminate why God instituted this practice. Circumcision was meant to be a private outward physical reminder of an inward change. Without being too graphic here, circumcision was never meant to be public. Like our culture for the most part, the Jews were modest and not prone to public nudity. So it was a reminder, a physical reminder, that a man or a man and his partner would see. In intimate and private moments, the man and his wife would realize we are not our own. We worship the one true God, and he has called his children. There is nothing salvific or inherently redemptive about the physical act of circumcision. Rather it was a symbol that you belonged to God.

Now fast forward, the Judaizers have lost sight of this and turned it into a hurdle blocking the entrance into God's family. They turned what was supposed to turn people towards God as a

blockade from God. This was why Paul and Peter were so adamant. This wasn't a discussion about preferences or minor theological debates. These men are blocking people from the simple call to place their faith in Christ.

Let's return to "lift up thine eyes." The key part is second person singular. Sometimes the Bible is murky because of ancient languages and modern interpretations, especially around "you" and "yours" or "thine." We tend to struggle with the you singular and the "you" plural, or "you" being someone else. For the most part in the Bible, the *lift up thine eyes* is a command to an individual. "You," singular, lift up your eyes and see.

I can't think of any story in the Bible more appropriate or inappropriate to this concept. For a passage and a people obsessed with the circumcision of others, lift up your eyes. Stop looking down and stop looking at others, and lift up your eyes. Look at me. Stop worrying about other people and start focusing on me.

Acts 15:21-29

The movement of this second part can sound like trading one kind of legalism for another, but it isn't. He says, you will do well if...you avoid sexual immorality, meat sacrificed to idols, etc. The first part is about justification. This is about sanctification. This is where Christians often get confused. We ask non-believers to participate in sanctification when they haven't even experienced justification. They haven't understood grace or forgiveness and church folk are expecting them to be holy when they barely are.

They have stopped saying you have to be circumcised to be saved to now saying, once you are saved, consider these actions which will help separate you from the world around you and lead to your growth. When it comes to salvation, nothing is required. Nothing.

That leads us back to the most important thing you can do for the salvation of others and for your own sanctification. Lift up thine eyes. When you are looking up, you are reminded that grace is free. When you are looking up, you are reminded that sanctification is a journey of faith and joy and obedience.

The problem comes when we become exclusive. When we mix up sanctification and justification. When we expect from others that which we can barely maintain ourselves. Lift up thine eyes. Your eyes.

If you want to know how this church will thrive and grow in its second century of existence, I want you to try something this week. Stop on a busy sidewalk and look up. Don't stop other people and grab their faces to shove them skywards. Don't stop other people and point towards the sky. Don't stop other people and preach at them to look up.

All you have to do is lift up thine eyes. Your eyes. The world doesn't need more preachers or missionaries. It does need more devotees, more admirers. People who stop and consider the wonder of the Divine Father. Not in an insufferable or public way, but in a true and honest way that requires no audience but may end up gathering one. Lift up thine eyes. Lift up your eyes. Don't look down into ways to exclude or shame. Don't look down towards ways to endless arguments and political messes. Lift up thine eyes.

Quite literally, I think if you stopped on a sidewalk and looked up, others would follow suit. How much more when the world sees you lifting up your eyes. Not so you can convert them or shame them, but because it means something to you. That changes people. When they see people who have been wowed by God's miracles and awed by his grace, they too will look up.

Jesus tells his followers in the gospels that he will be lifted up like Moses lifted the snake in the desert. That is a strange parallel until you really dig into it. After several Israelites were stung by serpents, Moses was commanded to make a bronze serpent and lift it up. If the people would

lift up their eyes and look upon it, they would be healed. This sounds like paganism, but it is faith. Don't look down to where the serpents are and where the painful, venomous bites come from. Instead look up. In the same way, when it comes to the crucified and resurrected Jesus lifted up, don't look down. Lift up your eyes. Look up and don't look down or around. When you look up, it will change you. When you look up, it will be the number one thing that encourages others to do so. Norman Rockwell painted a self-portrait that was utterly self-aware.

<http://www.nrm.org/MT/text/TripleSelf.html>

He had pictures of other artists in the corner of his painting to inspire him. He edited his glasses out because they weren't as flattering as he'd like. At the end of the day, he is lifting up his eyes. Seeing himself, focusing on no others. The temptation is to imitate and copy, but he has lifted up his eyes to focus on himself.

When it comes to the gospel and sharing it with others, we can focus on others and what they need to do, but the best thing we can do is to lift up our own eyes. To adore our maker and let him handle the rest. To be awed by our savior and stop putting restrictions on others. When we see Jesus as he really is, gracious, loving, inclusive and kind, we will see ourselves and others the way God wants us to.