

Bristol Lutheran

Acts 15

5-12-2017

Easter 5

Shift.

Shifting sands.

Shifting tectonic plates.

Shifting waves.

Shifting in your seats.

Shift of stocks.

Shift in time.

Shift the tables.

Shift movements.

Shift in culture.

Shift places.

Shift back.

Shift gears.

Makeshift.

Shift key.

A simple word, with complex meaning.

Shift is a deviation, or a transformation, another word for change.

But we have a hard time with change, so maybe it is better to say

‘shift.’

There is a theory that the Church shifts every 500 years, and not just because it is a good round number that is easy to remember. Throughout history, the Christian church goes through a 500 year cycle – full of excitement, upheaval, anticipation, anxiety. Old ideas are rejected and new ones emerge to take their place.

Probably more exciting for those looking back on the time periods, than those of us in the middle of the shift. It feels like the church is a chaotic mess. It's unsettling, like we are in the washing machine spin cycle.

Yet...the result of church shifts - always end with revitalized expression of the faith.

We gotta admit - God is pretty shifty.

Starting with Jesus, is the Great Transformation (year 0), and the Fall of Rome (500), the schism – split of the eastern and western churches (1000), the Reformation (1500), and now in 2000 and beyond...whatever we want to call it.

One author and Theologian, Phyllis Tickle, calls this era the Great Emergence.

A pastor and author, Mark Tidsworth, simply defines it as Shift.

The shifts in our church culture is heard in the story of the first council – as church leaders argue over how to follow Jesus. Do you need to first be a Jew, circumcised, or can you just follow? No brainer, right? It isn't like we don't have to become Catholic before becoming Lutheran!

But this was a contentious debate. The Pharisees versus Paul, Peter, and the apostles. God has opened the door of faith to gentiles - all non-Jews - and there is no requirement. Just like our Ethiopian Eunuch baptism from last week.

Or as Peter says...God, knows the human heart, gave gentiles the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us Jews; cleansed their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.

God has given an unimaginable gift. No difference excludes you from God's gift of grace. No longer is there the "us and them" distinction! Nothing stops God from this shift in time and church history, and from bringing the promise to each and every person. But it still caused anxiety and uneasiness. And the Spirit helped them work through all their emotions.

A council trying to discern what God is doing here and now, and for the future, is relevant for all of us, in anytime. Whether Bristol Lutheran Church Council Thursday night, Synod Assembly in Middleton, or the ancient church councils in Acts. These council meetings aren't just business - they are the life and growth, the movement of God in the congregation and community.

Sometimes we have a hard time recognizing what God is doing...and sometimes we get wrapped up in the business, and the details, we forget about the joy of ministry.

Sometimes we are lost in the shifts – we don't see God's spirit leading us through transitions.

God is working hard as faithful minds meet together. New ideas that are sparked, in worship and prayers, even in the debates that arise. God is working always to lead the Church – and the congregation to the next chapter.

God has been working through councils from the beginning. This is what it means to be church. No one except Jesus has a perfect handle on the will of God...so we do it together. That is gift.

Mark Tidsworth was the speaker at synod assembly a couple weeks back – and spoke about shift.

Not only our shift in church culture – but our need to shift our thinking, our language, our church conversations.

The church today is in a new reformation. The ways we were church in 1970, the height of Christianity, no longer work today. Announcements and signup sheets - don't bring in volunteers. Programs don't keep families at church. Engaging worship and perfect music - isn't going to fill our pews. Trying harder, or praying more – isn't going to grow the ministry. Shifting means we can't do what we did 60 years ago, and expect it to work.

Church is changing. We no longer can think of our mission as what we do...but who we are.

We can't *do* church - we need to be church – in new ways.

Shifting away from the way we define our congregation by its members, and talk about us as a community of disciples.

Shift away from marketing and statistics and programs and attracting people to us – and be missional, going into the streets of our community in ways that move us beyond service projects.

Shift away from a church that consumes (What do I get out of Bristol) to a church that gives and partners and participates - regardless of the benefit to us.

To be a church that let's go of the traditions, that no longer meet the needs of the community, and allow new doors to open.

To be a church that engages in holy experimenting – even if the idea fails.

To be a church that relies less on the professional/staff to lead the ministry.

To be a church that meets – on a day other than Sunday morning.

To be a church that isn't controlled by numbers and budgets, or organizational structures that are inefficient.

To be a church that adapts and shifts, to a new culture, as we are church in this changing community.

It won't be easy. How to be church, is discovered through conversation together. Discerning the scriptures and our experience, and God's way in this world. The Acts council discussed their new understanding of faith and life, we too need to talk about what's going on. Because we don't make these shifts alone. We are church together.

As shifty as God is... throughout all of history's movements, remember, God really is not doing a new thing...God is doing what God has always done: forming people for God's presence in the world. We are the people who adjust to what God is doing.

God's shiftiness, is not comfortable. The good news is, God has been here before, even if we haven't. And God is leading us through it.

God's mercy is wide. God's patience is enduring. God's love is lavish. God's table is abundant. God's work never ends.

Hang on. We're shifting.