# Sermon Script: Mission Month 2017 1) Our Backgrounds Are Too Different Acts 15:1-35

One of the points from last week when we talked about Self Image was:

* ‘There is no normal’
* What that meant was, when we desperately try to be ‘normal’, we’re really just conforming to some person’s random idea, or society’s currently promoted ideal
  + - There is no objective ‘normal’
    - And we know that because between cultures, across age ranges, and from one clique to another,

... we haven’t got a hope of agreeing on what’s normal

So I thought today we’d start by...

... outing some of the behaviours we get told we have to conform to, to be ‘normal’

* I posed this question to people this week: ‘What's the most ridiculous thing you were ever expected to do to fit in?
  + Here are some of the answers I found:

**Carry school bag on one shoulder, not two. Two was super uncool**

* This was me in my school days
* No one ever explained why!

**I was told I had to gather my ankle socks if I wanted to be in the cool girls group**

* This was from an FB friend reflecting on her school years
* Again, there’s no practical reason for this & it doesn’t achieve anything except a badge of coolness

**I was told I had to part my hair to the side. Centre partings weren't cool**

* As if there weren’t enough school rules already - as teens we made our own & forced them on others!

What about outside of school?

**Having to wear stilettos when I was an office secretary**

* Really painful on your feet and legs, and particularly when you wear them all day!

**Wear walk shorts & walk socks when I first started work**

* How many of us know what walk shorts & walk socks were?
* I got made to wear these when I did holiday work for my father’s accounting firm

What about between cultures?

**Do up my top shirt button in Scotland; but then not do it up in the US**

* This guy went to school in Scotland, where doing your top button up was what everyone did
* Then moved to the US where no one did!
  + There is no objective ‘normal’ - it’s just what local people randomly decide

**The expectation that I must vote the same way as my neighbours (a kiwi in the US)**

* I don’t know how widespread, but I’m told that there are Republican neighbourhoods and Democrat neighbourhoods
* And even churches!!

**Wear long trousers in Asia in super high temperatures**

* I grew up thinking when it’s hot you wear shorts
* That was normal for me - and practical too
* Who wants to add more clothing when it’s hot!?
* But when I travelled to places in Asia, the Guidebooks would often say,
  + ‘Don’t wear shorts here, regardless of how hot it is’

**Blow nose on tissue & put it in pocket!! urgghh!! (A Korean in NZ)**

* A South Korean student at Bible College observed kiwis blowing their nose on tissues then putting it in their pocket
* This was not at all normal to her
* She’d say: ‘Why do you want to take that with you?’

**Keep up with the ever changing rules for Permanent Residence**

* Some people immigrating to NZ have found the process really frustrating
  + With many rules, & new rules being made

**Having to share my lunch (I'm in tertiary training with Pacific Island students)**

* This girl is 20 and has done study in a place with lots of PI students
* And apparently they all share their lunch and want some of hers too
* ‘These are my sandwiches’ she says. I made them for me with the things I like in them. Back off!
  + Because that’s how it’s been for most kiwis growing up in NZ

**To own an iPhone. And it must be from the last two years**

* How often are you made to feel abnormal if you don’t acceptable gadgets, or gadgets of a particular brand?

**To make up stories about yourself to sound impressive & cool**

* This was from a high school student
* Imagine what a fake kind of environment that creates
* Where everyone has to make themselves sound impressive, so people constantly exaggerate or even make up stories about themselves in order to be popular

**To never wear a rain coat to school, even if it's raining heavily**

* I need to say - I didn’t write that comment
* This came from one of my FB friends who’s a school teacher
* So if this is a live issue, and it’s not currently acceptable at your school to wear a raincoat, even if the heavens unleash a deluge and it turns you into a drowned rat by the time you get to school and you have to sit like that sopping all day
  + Then please don’t shoot me for saying this - I’m only the messenger!

And while we sometimes laugh...

... at what we did in our teens

* This problem is everywhere
  + Why can’t you be a judge without wearing one of these:

And why do the guys outside Buckingham Palace have to wear these stupid hats?

And my favourite of all is for Star Trek fans

* After time travelling back to the late twentieth century and landing on earth

... here is Captain Kirk explaining to Mr Spock that in order to fit in, in the late 20th century, you should use at least one swear word in every sentence

* + If you want to see how awkward Mr Spock’s attempts are at swearing in order to fit in, go and rent the movie Star Trek Four!

All of these examples...

... seem ridiculous to those who are not part of the group doing them

* They all require you to keep an extra and unecessary rule
  + And all of them require you to do something painful or costly, to be acceptable to others
  + And they all involve the pressuring of individuals by a dominant culture

Exactly this same thing happens in today’s Bible passage

* You have to do something crazy, costly, and somewhat painful - in order to fit in
* ***You need to get circumcised in order to be a proper Christian***

Here is the opening verse from Acts chapter 15

1 While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: “Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

* Does that seem ridiculous to anyone?
* This is not only necessary to be a proper Christian, they’re saying You can’t be saved without going through this very painful surgical procedure

While we’re here, notice the places they are talking about:

* There are two churches - the older, established one, full of Jewish believer in Jerusalem, Judea
  + Then the newer church, which is multicultural up in Antioch

So some people have shown up...

... who appear to have come from the Jerusalem church

... to make sure that these multicultural people become like Jewish people in order to share faith in Christ

Now as ridiculous as this seems, it’s actually a big issue

* Watch how it plays out:

2 Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone’s joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

* Notice the very pointed comment:
  + We visited Gentiles along the way and they were perfectly happy and perfectly ‘saved’ without needing to be circumcised and turned into Jews

But you can also see that this is now a church wide problem

* So tell me, if the answer is so obvious to us, why was this even a debate for them?

**FEEDBACK**

[You’re cutting off your heritage? God chose the Jewish people and spoke to Abraham, Moses etc. Are we saying we don’t need the Jews anymore? Are they not really the chosen people? What are you going to do with their Scriptures? How far does this ditching of Judaism go? God fearing people coming to our lands have been taking on Judaism for generations]

What happens next...?

4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. 5 But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, “The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.”

Oh no! Now it’s a problem in both churches!

* Some down in the Jerusalem church agree!

So with this issue, live...

... and both churches now up in the air on it

... what exactly do we think is at stake?

**FEEDBACK**

So with so much hanging on this issue...

... how they deal with it is incredibly important

* Is this going to be one of the big stuff ups of the early church
  + Or will they handle it well?
  + And how exactly should they handle it - do you think?
    - And who should make the decision?

What decision will they make?

* Because I’d say the expected outcome to any onlooker in that day would be:
  + ***This can’t be resolved***
  + ***Jews and Gentiles - their backgrounds are just too different***
    - ***You can’t make one group out of them***
    - ***Just let both groups go their own ways and do their own thing***
* Let’s read it - if you want to follow along see Acts 15 in your pew Bible

6 So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. 7 At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: “Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. 8 God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. 10 So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? 11 We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.”

12 Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

13 When they had finished, James stood and said, “Brothers, listen to me. 14 Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. 15 And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:

16 ‘Afterward I will return

and restore the fallen house of David.

I will rebuild its ruins

and restore it,

17 so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord,

including the Gentiles—

all those I have called to be mine.

The Lord has spoken—

18 he who made these things known so long ago.’

19 “And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood. 21 For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.”

The Letter for Gentile Believers

22 Then the apostles and elders together with the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders—Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas. 23 This is the letter they took with them:

“This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings!

24 “We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but we did not send them! 25 So we decided, having come to complete agreement, to send you official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We are sending Judas and Silas to confirm what we have decided concerning your question.

28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: 29 You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”

30 The messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the believers and delivered the letter. 31 And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.

32 Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith. 33 They stayed for a while, and then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace. 35 Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch. They and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord there.

How did they do?

* They did incredibly well
* Thank goodness
* Or Christianity would have died with them

In fact, they did so well at handling this...

... that it’s worth our time to check what they did

... and ask whether we could learn something about how to solve problems when we’re divided

So look closely at this:



1. They got their wisest people to look at it - the apostles & those who’d been elected as elders

* If they’d just had a whole church vote it would’ve been split down the middle

1. By listening to all sides before deciding

* That’s really noticeable
  + They down rush it, or railroad it, or ridicule those who disagree
  + It’s 19 verses before there’s any movement towards a decision

1. They consider Scripture, experience and the Spirit’s guidance
2. They clarify misunderstandings & correcting untruth (v24)

* It wasn’t the Jerusalem church who had sent those false teachers

1. They stand together once truth is discerned

* Unity was really important to them
  + It said oin v25: 'having come to complete agreement'

1. They give clear and practical behavioural guidelines (v29)

* They don’t leave the Antioch church wondering how to apply their decision
  + They tell them exactly

1. They write it down so it can't be ignored or easily dismissed (v23)

* Sometimes a letter is important to make things clear
  + But more than that, they...

1. Send people with the letter to endorse what it says or deal with any questions (v27)

* If you just send people letters - or emails - to sort them out

... it can be very impersonal

... and makes it awkward when you do eventually meet

* So they made it relational - they sent people with the letter
* And finally...

1. They endorse Barnabas & Paul, the current leaders of that church (v25-26)

What a great process!

* Imagine if churches always solved their differences as well as that!
  + Imagine if we solved our differences at school, work or home as well as that!
  + Acts 15 is a great model to follow for resolution of differences

But if conflict resolution is one application of this passage

... then there’s another application that I think is absolutely crucial:

* Should we as Christians, do mission to Muslims or Buddhists?
  + Or should we just say: ‘Our backgrounds are too different.’
    - ‘Let them believe what they believe and we’ll believe what we believe.’
* And our kiwi friends who don’t go to church
  + Should we just say, ‘Our backgrounds are too different.’
    - ‘They’re not churchy people. They don’t even believe in God.’
      * ‘Let them believe what they believe, and we’ll believe what we believe’

But reaching across different backgrounds...

... is the whole point of Christianity.

* + ‘Every nation, tribe and tongue’ is how it all ends up in heaven
    - And God himself crosses a cultural barrier when He sends His Son to earth

Christianity was never about being a westerner

... or being right wing conservative, or male

* The whole point is we’re a community of all different backgrounds
  + And Jesus prayed that we might all be one
  + That’s what’s so brilliant and exciting about Christianity

And we do have MABC workers...

... working among Buddhists and Muslims

* It’s pretty important that we have this biblical basis for doing that work

So if this passage has application for conflict resolution...

... and also for going cross cultural with our faith

* the biggest application for me is with this peer pressure thing that we started with

You see, in all those examples we started with...

... of ridiculous things you have to do to fit in

***... something trivial is drawing people away from what’s really important***

* And also in the passage - circumcision was going to become the main thing
  + ***It’s the dominant culture wrenching you away from what’s really important***

And I reckon that’s happening right here...

... right now at MABC

* I think society constantly pulls us away from following Christ

I was thinking about how in most areas of life...

... we never try to set the bar low

* For example if you’re a ***businessman***...

... get your colleagues together and say:

... How can we make as little money as possible this year?

* And you wouldn’t if you were a ***school principal***...

... get your teachers together and say:

How can we teach our students as little as possible this year

* And you wouldn’t take your family on ***holiday to the Gold Caost*** and say:

... let’s talk about how we can have as little fun as possible

* We set the bar high, we don’t set it low!

So why is it, that when it comes to Christianity...

... we set the bar so low

... and ask: ***How much can I get away with and still be a Christian?***

With Mission Month or Self Denial

... as it’s called elsewhere

* It seems more common to joke about giving something up, than to actually do it

And if we do give something up...

... we try to do the simplest thing we can

... something that doesn’t require any real effort

* + - * + We set the bar as low as possible

I remember this same thing at Bible College

[Fieldwork - various options. Easy option - Choir for 2 hours on a Fri aft - done! Cf teaching Religious Education in schools. Who’s going to grow more. ‘Be the spiritual champion of the year - choose R.E.’]

It’s a little similar...

... to how hardly any Christians fast anymore - for any reason

* Why is that?
  + Is it that our stomach is our God rather than God himself
  + We couldn’t give up eating even for a meal or two to remind ourselves of the importance of puttng God first
* And many Christians don’t ***share their faith*** with anyone anymore - it’s too hard
* Many Christians don’t ***read Bibles*** anymore - it’s too hard
* And I even wonder after 100 years of sending one long term ***missionary*** per year
* That it’s now become just too hard to be a missionary

I wonder if people are on fire for Jesus anymore

* Or whether we’re trying to set the bar as low as possible
  + See how little we can get away with and still be Christians

We western christians have got really soft

* With all our gadgets, and multiple forms of entertainment
  + And varieties of food so endlessly available
* It’s just too hard to give any of that up, for the sake of the needs of people

... like those Karen folk in Thailand, who don’t have any of it

... even just for fifteen days

So the challenge I’m leaving you with is self evident

* When you consider giving something up for Mission month
* And putting money aside for those who need it

... will you set the bar as low as possible

... and choose something that doesn’t challernge you at all?

... or even worse, just not get round to making a decision on it

Or can you prove to yourself...

... that your relationship with God is alive, and it’s vital and important to you

... that God comes first in your life

I love coffee

* I’m a coffee snob - I like a really good flat white

... and I can’t stand instant coffee

* And coffee keeps my mind active during the week
  + I’ve come to rely on it I guess

And while I don’t drink a lot

... I enjoy a glass of wine now and again

* + - It feels like a good day when I can have a glass of wine for dinner

And I also really like all kinds of juice and smoothies

* And I’m quite a fan of Green Tea

So it’s not going to be easy for me...

... to give all those up for the 15 Day Mission Month Challenge, which starts today

... and drink nothing but water

***What are you giving up?***