**Widening the Tent**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**Easter 5, May 14, 2017**

**Acts 15: 1-18 Russell Mitchell-Walker**

Brian McLaren is one of the leaders of the Emerging Church movement, which is a post-modern movement to create a more just and generous Christian community, pretty much outside of denominational or institutional lines. Some, like Phyllis Tickle, who wrote the book, [The Great Emergence](http://www.phyllistickle.com/books/the-great-emergence/), call Brian the Martin Luther of the Emerging Church movement. I first met him at a party in 2014 and found myself in the same vehicle for a ride home. I asked him how we as the United Church of Canada, who as a church is progressive, inclusive, committed to social justice and as such fits in with much of the Emerging Church, but we are an institution, so how can we be more Emerging, given that?

His response was that there are a growing number of evangelical congregations that are finding themselves without a building or church as they are kicked out of their denomination for being inclusive of LGBT and we have a lot of churches that are closing. We could make available these church buildings to these congregations or communities of faith and welcome them into our fold. We could also welcome individuals who are feeling exiled from their church because of their shifting understandings of faith. He added that we should be setting aside a portion of the funds from the sale of the congregations for the future of the church and new church development or church plants. These were challenging ideas. As the United Church, many of us have been quite judgemental about evangelical conservative and fundamentalist Christians. Evangelicals were lumped into one category of Christians many of us disagreed with. Were we ready as a national church to welcome evangelicals into our midst who were inclusive of LGBT, part of the growing movement of progressive evangelicals? Were we willing to be generous with our property to do so? Are we in our church community open to welcoming evangelicals who may becoming disillusioned with their church community but still want to follow Jesus?

While the issues may not be quite as controversial as the discussion in the early church about welcoming Gentiles and what is required of them to be part of the church, there are similarities. In our scripture reading today, the church is divided on whether the gentiles who have been baptized and welcomed into this newly forming community of followers of Jesus, needed to be circumcised and presumably follow other Jewish laws. While the discussion happens over a chapter or two in scripture, in reality it probably took a few years because it started before Pauls’ conversion, and Paul says he went away for two years to be instructed in the faith. What is important to note is that while this intense debate was going on, they continued to work and be in ministry together with grace. This is something many of us in the church could learn from. How often in churches we have attended, have we experienced people leaving because of a conflict or difference of opinion? Can we disagree and remain in community, respecting and continuing to work together?

While the example of welcoming Progressive Evangelicals may not be as an intense conflict in the United Church as the one described in our Acts reading today, perhaps the situation with Gretta Vosper, declaring herself an atheist minister and the implications for Progressive Christianity and the United Church is. [Gretta Vosper](http://www.grettavosper.ca/) has been provocative in identifying herself as an atheist minister within the United Church. She does not believe in an interventionist, omnipotent God, up in the sky controlling or influencing our lives. Many of us don’t. However, she goes further than most who have this kind of theology in saying she doesn’t believe in any divinity, or the Trinity. As a result she has been challenged, [interviewed](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/09/08/defrock-atheist-minister-gretta-vosper-united-church-panel-urges.html) by the Toronto Conference Review Committee of the church which declared that there needs to be a judicial hearing to determine her status as a United Church minister. It is likely she will be put on the discontinued service list, meaning she will no longer be a United Church minister. It is unclear what will happen to her congregation. A congregation that is very supportive of her and appreciate the ministry she offers. They are not the only congregation either. Progressive Christianity in Canada is a movement that moves beyond traditional understandings of God. Many Progressive Christian communities have shifted away from using God language, believing that it carries too much baggage of our traditional understandings of God. We read from their website: *Progressive Christianity is an open, intelligent, and collaborative approach to the Christian tradition and the life and teachings of Jesus that creates a pathway into an authentic and relevant religious experience.* They are committed to living the questions, have a greater concern for the way people treat each other, than how they express their beliefs, and are open to supporting people who wish to craft a spiritual life connected to the way of Jesus.

While I am not in the same place theologically as Gretta Vosper, I resonate with some of what she says about God. I don’t believe in an interventionist God that can control or influence our lives. But I still believe in God, that Divine energy that is in, with and through us, so I have no trouble using God language and believe we need to redefine our understanding of what that means for us, not throw it out because of the baggage of past understandings. However, I respect that this not possible for some people. Some of what we are talking about is what [Diana Butler Bass](http://dianabutlerbass.com/books/grounded-finding-god-in-the-world-a-spiritual-revolution/) is presenting in her book, Grounded, that we are studying Thursday afternoons. She identifies that many have moved from a vertical understanding of God, God up in the sky, in the heavens, to a horizontal God, God in and with us.

In our reading in Acts, some commentaries identify the issue of circumcision as a side issue. The main issue is what place the law had on this emerging church and salvation – what was the nature of salvation. Jewish believers accepted Jesus as the Messiah and saw themselves as a movement within Judaism. But not all believers were Jewish, so the question was raised can you be Christian without being Jewish. In the end, what was important was grace and faith in Jesus. That was the underlying message and meaning for the church – having faith in Jesus. So, in this changing and challenging time in our culture, when it seems so many do not believe in God, when in fact, while many are not attending church, many actually still believe in God, is it not better to be open to those who find different ways of expressing their faith and still follow Jesus? That is the challenge for us as church. My concern with excluding Gretta as a minister of the church, is how it will be viewed by the community outside of the church and see that the United Church is just like other churches who see doctrine and law as more important than love and grace. Isn’t that what Jesus was challenging in the Pharisees?

The debate among the early Christians was not about something new but about something God was doing in their midst that they needed to get on board with. They needed to welcome Gentiles into their community because it was obvious that the Holy Spirit of God was actively moving through and in them. In the end they realized who are they to question God’s activity amongst them? Is there a similar situation now? What is God doing in our midst – in our community, in our neighbourhood, in the midst of the wider church? The church is changing, Christianity is changing as new communities emerge and new ways of being church evolve. God is active and we might need to change or open our tent wider to join the movement or get on board. That is the challenge for us. It may be about welcoming evangelicals looking for a new way to be a follower of Jesus. It may be accepting followers who have a different understanding of God than us. It is about widening our tent and maybe even going beyond denominational lines and bounds. We have some opportunity to do that in our context here. Are we prepared to do that? Are we open to what God is up to in our midst? Are we open to exploring what God is up to in our neighbourhood that we might join in on? Maybe God is calling us to something. May we be open to seeing what it is.