

6th Sunday of Easter

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 15:1-2, 22-29

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved." Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question. The apostles and elders, in agreement with the whole church, decided to choose representatives and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The ones chosen were Judas, who was called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers. This is the letter delivered by them: "The apostles and the elders, your brothers, to the brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia of Gentile origin: greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number who went out without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind, we have with one accord decided to choose representatives and to send them to you along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. So we are sending Judas and Silas who will also convey this same message by word of mouth: 'It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell.'"

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8

O God, let all the nations praise you!

May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine upon us. So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations, your salvation.

O God, let all the nations praise you!

May the nations be glad and exult because you rule the peoples in equity; the nations on the earth you guide.

O God, let all the nations praise you!

May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you! May God bless us, and may all the ends of the earth fear him!

O God, let all the nations praise you!

SECOND READING: Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23

A reading from the Book of Revelation:

The angel took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal. It had a massive, high wall, with twelve gates where twelve angels were stationed and on which names were inscribed, the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites. There were three gates facing east,

three north, three south, and three west. The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were inscribed the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 14:23-29

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; yet the word you hear is not mine but that of the Father who sent me. "I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. You heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I will come back to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 6th Sunday of Easter

For many years, pastors and staff members have used the term collaboration. What it means, in practice, is to come to a consensus. A consensus is a choice of action enacted by mutual agreement or one with which all can live. It's not always an easy approach. This is what we have witnessed in this passage from Acts. The Christian community in Antioch faced a problem. Should Christians have to adopt Judaic Law and practices in order to become members of the Church? Up until the time of this event, most Christians, like Paul, Peter and James were Jews. In Paul's letters he wrote that he was a faithful, practicing Jew and a Pharisee. Jesus himself in the Gospel stated the same and said, "Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete." (Matthew 5:17 The Revised English Bible)

This problem was a big one. This dealt with the nature of salvation at the heart of the gospel. The main point had to do with the issue of initiation. Was baptism by water and the Spirit enough? Was circumcision necessary too? In Judaism, for men only, it was the mark, or scar, of being Jewish. Faith was the key for the covenant between God and people. Removal of a man's foreskin had to do with tribal initiation not a religious one. True, one's faith can lead people to live in certain ways, but in the gospel, what does it take to be saved?

This is what Jesus, himself, said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 REB) Faith is all people need to be saved. How do people come to faith? He also said, "No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:44 REB) It is by the grace of God that brings people to faith, a gift. How do people know they are saved? Jesus also gave one command, "I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then

everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (John 13: 34-35 REB) It is in this setting that Jesus has saved us. We need nothing else.

I mentioned collaboration as I began. How did the Church arrive at a decision? They discussed and debated the issues. The local Church in Antioch widened the circle of such to include the Church in Jerusalem. There, the apostles, elders and members discussed, debated and prayed. The Church was growing beyond the borders of Palestine and the Jewish people and into pagan territory and the lives of Gentiles. The very early believers had hoped that all Jews would come to faith in Jesus; that hadn't happened. The Church became more and more Gentile in membership. Weighing all their options, the Church maintained that the words of Jesus were good on their own for salvation. Having faith and witnessing to it has been our way ever since. This had been a collaborative consensus. When we, as Catholics, believe in infallibility, it is based on this. The pope will promulgate what the Church, together, has come to believe and live. It is the entire membership led by the Holy Spirit that will never fail.

The decision also included some aspects of Judaic Law. There were considerations of marriage and diet. These dealt with the practical life in the Church between Jews and Gentiles. Let me give an example. I have friends who are alcoholics in recovery. Some have been so for years and some not so long. When I go out to dinner, I may have a scotch or a beer and I enjoy wine with my meal. As much as I like to eat fine food, I enjoy the company of others more. I will always ask those in recovery if they mind if I have an alcoholic beverage. Some I know don't mind, but others do. I am always mindful of that for I don't need to drink to enjoy a supper with friends. That's the context of the few stipulations tacked on at the end of the letter. Now that the Church is nearly all Gentile, they don't matter so much.

The process of this decision is important to note. It was communal; all had a role and voice. Prayer was essential; with the Holy Spirit they were able to discern the course of action. Their discernment was based on the gospel and Jesus words. Faith, love and salvation are all gifts of God. The Church's path has led directly to us. We can all learn a lot from this passage to guide us as the Church, especially as we form a new parish. Together in Christ and guided by the Spirit, we will not fail. We may stumble and bumble as did the early Church, but in God there is the forgiveness of our missteps and sins. This is good news as we embark on this endeavor with no other safety net and not knowing what we're doing. The Holy Spirit walks with us.

Once in a while, people will remark about what they think is their ideal church building. Often what they describe can sound like elements of this passage from Revelation. Ornate, gothic structures for centuries have been the ideal. While in many of the ancient cathedrals of Europe can be grand and lofty, many are devoid of much opulence. I was baptized and raised in St. Benedict Parish on the north side of Chicago. As a kid, it was filled with what we all assumed to be marble pillars, statues, altar rail, altar and pulpit. Gold leaf seemed to be everywhere. Frescoes adorned the walls and ceiling. Stained glass let in dazzling light. However, much was illusion.

There were no frescoes; all the paintings were on canvas that was papered to the walls. All the marble pillars were, in fact painted plaster; as were the altar, pulpit and stands for the statues. I knew the artist who marbleized them. The statues and altar rail were the only things of marble. The gold doors on the rail and on the tabernacle were made of brass. In 1966-67, we remodeled. The canvas paintings were taken down. From years of paraffin wax smoke, to restore them was too expensive.

The original artist who marbled the plaster pillars didn't have the control in his hands any more and it had become a lost art. The statues became less prominent and the altar rail was removed. In the pulpit and old altar's place was a new marble pulpit and marble altar. Many parishioners hated the renovations. My grandmother put in her will that she would not be buried from there. She wasn't. However, I always liked what they did. When I had my first mass there in 1979, my deacon, master of ceremonies and I remarked how well the church was laid to accommodate liturgy and ritual.

It's never about how any given church looks that's important, it's about what happens there that is. The congregation gathers together in Christ. Together we hear God's Word. Together we receive Jesus' Body and blood. In gathering we become Jesus Church, his mystical body. God feeds us in scripture and sacrament. There we glimpse God's glory in our community in what is essentially a meeting space. There we meet one another and Jesus. My father, a WWII vet, remarked often that during the war, his most powerful experience of Church was mass celebrated on the hood of a jeep. I have carried the memory of my father's words my entire life and am awed by the way the Spirit can work; simply and with humility. I find the grandeur of God can manifest in subtlety.

I mention this in light of today's reading from revelation. John again has tried to describe with words and symbolic images what is indescribable; the vastness of the Kingdom of God. Filled with special effects, he has tried to convey what none of us have faced; the glory of God. Why the number twelve? Why the number three? They weren't John's lucky or favorite numbers. There were twelve tribes of Jacob, also known as Israel. Jacob had twelve sons from whom descended a great nation and religion. There were twelve apostles who acted in Jesus mission to preach the Gospel to all people. He made the connection between God's chosen nation and God's nation by faith in Jesus. The faith of Jesus is based on the faith and promise to God's people, Israel. We are the new Israel. Why are there three gates for each entrance into God's people? Think the Trinity, the three in one in mystery.

Who is at the Church's heart? In whose name do we gather? The sacrificial Lamb of God, once slain but alive, now, forever! It is Jesus who is the heart of the Church. We used to pray this mystery of faith, "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." It shows that Jesus remains with us, that Jesus is present to the Father and will return to establish God's Kingdom all at the same time. The Church's heart is at the same time fully human and fully divine. To gather we need no temple for God lives in each of us. We become the Church of Jesus when we gather. It's the gathering together and not the place where it does that is important. We don't go to Jesus; Jesus comes to us.

As I have gotten older, I don't see so well at night or in the dark. We have very dim lighting in the church, especially at the altar. It would be wonderful if John's words, at mass, were literal. Also as I have gotten older, I find more insight into scripture. This is partly due to a lifetime of my prayer and study of it but mostly by the grace of God and the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the only illumination we need. What comes out of heaven from God is an ongoing process that will continue until Jesus returns with God's Kingdom.

This is not to say that revelation continues. God spoke God's Word in Jesus. The Word has spoken fully. Jesus revealed the Father to us. Jesus has saved us once and for all. We have all the faith we need for salvation; in God and in Jesus. There is no more salvation available to us. Yet our faith will continue to deepen as we live life. When I go back and read my former reflections on the same readings, my discernment of their meaning is not the same. When we

sin, God will forgive us. God draws us more closely, through all we do and say. One day that will end when we die and return to be one with God forever. Salvation has happened but continues to unfold as we seek God who seeks us.

John's gospel has its own approach and language. It differs from the three synoptic gospels'. The synoptic approach is more succinct, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." That is the greatest, the first commandment. The second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39 REB) John says much the same thing over a few chapters and at the Last Supper. Last week Jesus told us to love one another. Because we love God, ourselves and one another, we have the living God of love within us. God doesn't dwell in a temple, church or shrine. Because we live, love and believe, God indwells with each of us and we are bound for salvation and to the life of God. Our relationship with God is, by nature, intimate and as unique as we are. We share God's Spirit as a result. In John's gospel, Jesus breathed on each of the disciples to receive it, as by the breath of God, Adam became a living being.

What of those who don't love God? In the first letter of John we read, "My dear friends, let us love one another, because the source of love is God. Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God, for God is love." (1John 4:7-8 REB) Who does not love? Who isn't loved? Can we place those we love into the love of God? We are responsible to God for ourselves, not others. God has only children and not grandchildren through us. God works in God's own way and time. Each human being has come from God whether people know it or not.

Jesus' promise of peace comes from all of this. The world may go to hell in a hand basket. Our life may be on the verge or in the midst of chaos. Wars may rage around us. Where is this peace? Not as the world gives peace. Consider the context of this gospel and Jesus' words. This is part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" to the Eleven. Jesus is saying goodbye to the lads. He is about to be arrested, tried by a kangaroo court, nearly beaten to death and lynched being strange fruit hanging from a tree. This is not peace either, by the world's standard or ours. Execution as a criminal would not be my choice of a future.

Yet, Jesus faced it. His was peace. He knew and did what the Father sent him to do. As God's son, Jesus did the father's will. That was Jesus' peace; the Father and he were one. Peace was the will and presence of God in which was Jesus strength. Amid the Passion, Jesus knew peace. Jesus does have an advantage. He is fully human and fully divine. We have an advantage too. God's life lives in us. God is only a thought away. Peace is in God. We can find peace within us. Sometimes self doubt and self reproach can make peace elusive; we are, after all, human. Where do we turn for healing and forgiveness? Could peace also be a result of turning to God?

I have a fond memory of the word paraclete. When I first heard it, as a kid, I assumed it was a bird. My aunt had a parakeet. All the images of the Holy Spirit, I had seen, were of a dove. It is a Greek word. It can mean to call one near, to come to one's aid, a healer or advocate. Helper is a good word too. However, advocate is the one our translation of the bible used. An advocate speaks to or for someone. It's also another word for a lawyer. I have a hard time to think of the Holy Spirit as Perry Mason. A lawyer does stand in court and represent a client. A lawyer's place is next to a client and is the client's voice in court. Does the Spirit represent us to God and God to us?

Teacher is another word that can describe what paraclete means. Unlike the kid who spends the evening watching TV instead of studying for an exam and who then prays to the Holy Spirit to give him all the answers, the Spirit offers another kind of knowledge. I know; I've tried that, it never worked. Prayer does something else; discernment. Reflecting on scripture, I've always found new meaning in it. I have always found help with decisions or problems when I've invoked the guidance of the Spirit. The Spirit works best in conjunction with me. Together we can work well.

The indwelling life of God is part of the fabric of our lives. Rarely will God change our situations; that's from without. God changes us from the inside out. We discover gifts, ideas, healing and love within us. Peace is not something we will find just around the corner or with the things we have. Life, faith, peace and love are things we discover to be part of us. As gifts from God they are gifts we can share.

May we know God's presence and life within us.

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