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If you wanted to name the three most important events of your life, how would you go about choosing them? Your birth is an obvious first. But after that, what criteria would you use to select the others? Most of us would probably pick major transition points, choices that, as Robert Frost wrote, seemed to make all the difference.

In 1979, Karl Rahner, one of the most renowned theologians of the 20th century, described what he saw as the three pivotal stages in the history of the Catholic Church. The first, primitive Jewish Christianity, encompassed the short period of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the primitive Jewish-Christian movement. At this stage, Christianity existed within its own cultural reality as a movement within Judaism. In today's first reading, we hear about the struggle to grow into the second stage in which Christianity became open to the then-known world.

In Acts 15, Luke gives us only the vaguest of hints about the passion and drama involved in the disciples' arguments about what should be required of Gentile converts to Christianity. Luke summarizes the crux of the discussion by saying that some outsiders were teaching converts in Greek territory that "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved."

That position attacked the heart of Paul's preaching of the faith. For Paul, Christianity was built on faith in Christ expressed through love, nothing else. (Galatians 5:6) Anyone who required obedience to the old religious law had fallen from grace and was presuming to earn the salvation that was a free gift.

The Jewish Christians who held to the law felt that they were being true to thousands of years of their tradition as the chosen people. When they heard Paul claim that circumcision counted for nothing in Christ, they must have thought he was a lawless, liberal heretic. This internal conflict had the potential to deal a fatal blow to the newly growing Christian community and movement.

To resolve the impasse, the Greek community sent Paul and some companions to discuss it with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Luke says, "no little dissension and debate" took place. In other words, there was some very heated discussion. Since Jesus left no instructions on the matter, they had to listen to one another and seek God's will by listening and sifting vastly different points of view.

At one point, Peter, who had not always been the most courageous of witnesses, reminded them of his experience that Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just as the Jewish Christians had. Peter concluded, saying that God "made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts" (Acts 15:9). Others gave similar testimonies. Paul spoke of the holiness of the Gentiles, and James reminded the community that Israel's vocation was to bring all of humanity to God.

Luke doesn't tell us whether they met for an afternoon or for a week or more. All he tells us is that they aired their disagreements fully and struggled to discern the will of God together. In the end, they concluded that circumcision was not necessary. In other words, Paul's converts did not have to become Jews to be Christians, nor did the Jerusalem community have to abandon their synagogues and traditional prayer. As Karl Rahner put it, "Christianity ... was not the export" of Judaism but a faith, "which, for all its relationship to the historical Jesus, still grew on the soil of paganism."

This is crucial because without that decision, Christianity would have probably remained a small sect of Judaism, centered around Jerusalem. Instead, missionary disciples assumed the freedom to move through the known world and adapt to a much wider cultural reality — that which gave birth to Western Civilization.

According to Karl Rahner, the third pivotal moment for the church was the Second Vatican Council, when the bishops who met were natives of the entire world. For Rahner, Vatican II, like the Jerusalem Council, offered the church, which had been Euro-centric, the opportunity to become genuinely catholic, meaning universal. Whereas the Jerusalem Council allowed the church to become incarnate in the western world, Vatican II had the potential to open the church to become incarnate in the diversity of all the world's cultures.

What does this mean to us? The disciples' conflict can sound very familiar as we struggle over how our church and society are being called to adapt and change as technology shrinks distance, and travel and immigration bring diverse cultures into living contact with one another. If Paul and Karl Rahner are right, we are living in a moment of extraordinary grace and opportunity. Our debates may be fierce, but we need to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us if we are open. The road we choose will make all the difference.

### **ACTS 15:1-2, 22-29**

The events described in Acts 15 describe the pivotal issue of The Acts of the Apostles. The decision made in Jerusalem was essential to allow the Gospel to spread beyond the small group of Jesus' Jewish disciples.

The quotation Luke attributed to the false teachers from Judea summarizes the conservative side of the debate: "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved." The question of whether Gentile converts had to become Jews in order to be Christians echoed Jesus' debates with antagonistic religious leaders: They adhered to details of the law, while Jesus advocated for fulfilling its underlying purpose.

The central point of disagreement, circumcision, was the sign of the covenant that set Jewish men apart from the rest of the world. The debate had ramifications for the universality of the faith and for Paul's theology. The circumcision requirement not only repelled Gentile men, but also had the unacknowledged but highly significant effect of permanently relegating women to a different, if not inferior, status in the faith. Although Luke doesn't mention the Christian women, they surely had some opinions about the validity of their baptismal commitment as a sign of their full membership in the community Paul described as the body of Christ. Maintaining that circumcision was necessary for salvation seemed to ignore Jesus' egalitarian

practice and contradicted Paul's assertion that the Christian community should recognize no distinctions between Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female because they were all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

On a deeper level, the Judean missionaries' insistence that all disciples of Jesus must follow the Mosaic law cut out the heart of Paul's theology. Paul taught that the key to salvation was faith in Christ, not any particular ritual or practice. A crucial implication of the debate of Acts 15 was that the decision was ultimately about whether the incipient Jesus movement would choose to be a faithful sect of Judaism or become a broader community that respected but did not require adherence to Jewish religious practices.

The second crucial issue at stake in this incident was how to solve the disagreement, which according to Luke's understatement, "caused no little dissension and debate." We can rightly imagine that this dispute over the contradictory teachings and practices rivaled anything we have seen since Vatican II.

Because the debate could not be settled locally, the Greek community sent Paul and some of his companions to Jerusalem to work out a solution. Luke mentions in passing that they made use of their journey to pass through other communities and tell them "of the conversion of the Gentiles ... [bringing] great joy to all" (Acts 15:3). This may very well have been the first Christian lobbying effort.

When Paul and his companions met with the leaders in Jerusalem, the methodology they used to resolve their problem had three key steps. They looked at their experiences to discern how God had been active among them (Acts 15: 7-11); they looked to Scriptural models to help them understand what God was doing (15:13-17); they carried on hearty debate until they could come to a peaceful conclusion as the "ecclesia" or gathered church (15:4-5, 23-29).

In the end, they decided to limit religious requirements on Gentile converts. That decision opened the church to the world, affirmed Paul's theology of faith, and inadvertently admitted that gender was no marker of rank or authenticity among the faithful. That decision of opening the church to the world left the community with a commitment to openness that continues to challenge us today.

When they reached their conclusion, they did not claim infallibility nor try to make its details binding for all time. They believed they had relied on grace and done all

they could in their moment. Thus, they believed in the conclusion they finally reached in peace. Their confidence about the result was so strong that they could make the astounding statement that their decision was that of the Holy Spirit even before it was their own.

### **PSALM 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8**

This is officially a psalm of thanksgiving for a good harvest, but the Lectionary skips over verse seven, the verse that orients the psalm to agriculture. Thus, it becomes a call to universal praise of God.

Luke delicately told us that Paul made pastoral visits on his way to Jerusalem, spreading the word about how Gentiles were flocking to the Christian community. Luke could have added this psalm to Paul's not so subtle lobbying for eliminating Mosaic requirements for non-Jews who joined the community. This is a psalm with world vision.

From time immemorial, the human tendency has been to pray, "O God, let all the nations be like us!" And yet, the Creator opted for diversity from the moment male and female were fashioned in the divine image. God's message has always been that no one way, no one culture, no single gender is sufficient to mirror divinity.

This psalm begins with a plea for God's blessing on the praying community. But this personal request quickly turns us beyond ourselves as we pray that God's blessings will become a visible sign of salvation to the entire world.

The second verse can be prayed as a plea that all the world come to recognize the truth. It celebrates God's justice and implicitly asks that the world be open to God's guidance.

The third verse returns to the prayer that all nations may know and praise God. The last line, "... may all the ends of the earth fear him!" can easily be misinterpreted by those who don't realize that "fear of the Lord" is a phrase describing the awe we naturally feel when we get an intimation of God's grandeur. Understood that way, the prayer that all nations fear the Lord is a prayer that all come to know God.

### **REVELATION 21:10-14, 22-23**

This selection continues the vision of the new Jerusalem that we contemplated last week. John now looks over the city from a high mountain — a traditional locale for

religious experience. But now the mountain is nothing more than the necessary vantage point from which the holy city can be seen in all its glory.

John was dazzled by the light of the city. It gleamed like gems and its walls were luminous. When Ezekiel described God's city (Ezekiel 48:30-35), he said there were 12 gates which led out to the lands of each of the tribes of Israel. The new Jerusalem described in Revelation has 12 gates, but all the traffic goes in; this city is open to everyone from the four corners of the earth. The names of the tribes are inscribed on the gates not as a sign of ownership, but as a reminder that God's revelation to the nations comes through the covenant God made with Israel.

The most important feature of the city is what is not there. The temple, once understood to be the dwelling place of God, is no more. There is no need for a place of sacrifice. There is no need for a place set apart for prayer. There is no temple because there is no secular space from which it would be separated. God is all-present.

John's vision offered his persecuted people the sort of comfort peasants could find when they entered a great medieval cathedral. It filled their imagination with beauty, color, splendor and a true sense of the fear of the Lord. It was a source of hope for them, a vision that offered an alternative to the bleakness they witnessed in their daily struggles. Most of all, John's vision promises that one day we can all walk through the gates of that city with no temple and know that God is all in all.

### **JOHN 14:23-29**

Love is the central theme in this selection from Jesus' last supper discourse. First, we hear that anyone who loves Jesus will keep his word. No matter how we might explain love, Jesus gives it a precise definition here. He is not talking about the love as experienced in the typical relationships of friendship, family or marriage. The love he speaks of here is the love of union, the love of disciples who hear him and internalize his words and desires to the point that his message and hopes become a part of them. Keeping Jesus' word creates a relationship between Jesus and the disciples that reflects Jesus' relationship with the Father (John 15:10).

The second half of the first sentence of this reading can be confusing. Jesus says the Father will love those who keep his word. That could sound like a limitation on the love of God, an assertion that God does not love the sinner or that one can earn God's love by obeying Jesus' word. Both of those approaches miss the point Jesus is

making.

The next line clarifies the message. The love of which Jesus speaks here is not a way of regarding another, as if to say God sits on high and decides whom to love. Speaking of one who keeps his word, Jesus says, “We will come to him and make our dwelling with him.” Jesus is speaking of a love that is reciprocal. God can care deeply about everyone, but God does not invade or take over a person’s free will. Even Jeremiah who said to God, “You seduced me!” added “And I let myself be seduced.” He went on to say that God’s name is like “a fire burning in my heart” (Jeremiah 20:7, 9). God may be out to seduce us, but it is up to us to allow God in so that God’s love can enflame our hearts.

As he goes on, Jesus makes two promises: The Father will send Jesus’ Spirit to the disciples, and Jesus will leave them his peace. The Spirit is the mode of God’s ongoing presence with and within the disciples. Jesus promises that the very Spirit who animated him will be with them, helping them remain in his presence by teaching and reminding them of everything they need to know.

Finally, Jesus promises to bestow his own peace on the disciples. This is the shalom peace that encompasses love, integrity and the self-possession that makes self-giving possible. This peace flows from Jesus’ identity as the Father’s beloved. The world cannot give this peace because it is not large enough to hold it.

In the beginning, Jesus said his command and his legacy is love. Those who love will live through, with and in him. Because of this, they will rejoice that he is with the Father.

## **Planning: Sixth Sunday of Easter**

By Lawrence Mick

If you live in a diocese that celebrates the Solemnity of the Ascension on next Sunday rather than on Thursday, then you have the option this weekend of choosing the second reading and Gospel passages assigned for this weekend or the ones for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The first reading today is fixed.

That means we will all hear the same passage from Acts today, and it is a good one for us to reflect upon. Several points might catch our attention and be applied to our time.

The apostles and elders at the first council in church history came together to deal with one of the biggest conflicts in the past 2,000 years: Is the church to be a Jewish sect or a worldwide church? Some preachers had been insisting that people had to be Jewish in order to be baptized.

In a message to all the churches, the council made several important points. First, they note that unauthorized preachers were causing dissention by teaching their own opinion as law and trying to stop the forward movement toward becoming a universal church. We might see echoes of such behavior among those, both clergy and laity, who oppose the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and thus oppose Pope Francis.

Second, they set out a principle for the ages: “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities ... .” That verse is cited in the Rite of Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church: “The rite is so arranged that no greater burden than necessary (see Acts 15:28) is required for the establishment of communion and unity” (RCIA # 473). This principle fits well, too, with Francis’ emphasis on gradualism in dealing with people. It recognizes that people grow in holiness over a period of time. Demanding absolute compliance with church teaching often short-circuits that growth.

Finally, notice that the decision of the council was a compromise. It required everyone to follow a few practices that were normative for Jews but did not require becoming Jewish in order to be a Christian.

Can you see how these principles apply in our own time and in your community? As planners, we strive for the fullest and most beautiful worship we can foster, but sometimes we need to allow for variations and lead people gradually to a fuller appreciation of the liturgy. That liturgy needs to be open to the customs and experience of various groups as the church becomes more and more multi-cultural. Not everything is up for grabs; there are some basics or “necessities” we must maintain. But all of it should demand only what is necessary. That takes careful discernment and a lot of love!



# Prayers: Sixth Sunday of Easter

By Joan DeMearchant\_

## Introduction

The early church struggled with a common problem: who was in and who was not. The requirements were related to the cultural and religious practices of Jewish converts. Similar questions plague us to this day regarding who belongs in our country, our neighborhoods, our schools, even our church. The answers are easily found in Jesus' call to keep his word of love and peace. You would think we would have figured it out by now, but tribalism runs deep.

## Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you promised to be with us and to send the Spirit to guide us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you promised us your peace and love for all time: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you intend for us to extend this same peace and love to all people: Lord, have mercy.

## Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray now for a world torn apart by our attitudes and our behaviors.

**Minister** For the church that is still divided by disagreements and factions, that we may remember Jesus' call to live in love and peace, we pray:

- For the incorporation of more women and lay leadership in the church, as we struggle to respond to the Spirit's advocacy in the 21st century, we pray:
- For peace in the Middle East and throughout the world, especially where there is discord among Christians, Muslims, Jews or those of other faiths, we pray:
- For those who refuse to respect anyone who looks, speaks, dresses, behaves or believes differently; those whose faith is diminished by inflexibility, we pray:
- For those graduating this year who dream of new possibilities for the future; and for those burdened by student loans or barriers to their dreams, we pray:
- For those burdened by poverty, illness or grief; and those we serve through our parish ministries, we pray:

**Presider** God of splendor and radiance, strengthen in us the hope for a church and world unified in love and peace. Grant us the conviction to make your vision a reality wherever we are, at this moment in time. We are encouraged by the promise of Jesus to be with us, and we ask this in his name. Amen.

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