Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“I have called you friends” (John 15:14).

Acts 15:22-31; Jn 15:12-17

The diocese here is completing a deanery study that will culminate as the bishop presents a plan for 18 of the parishes within the city. Shifting demographics and a priest shortage have largely led to closure and merger of some. The consultation has been impacted by two years of the pandemic and low turnout. The use of an outside consultant with templates and calendar have produced administrative decisions that will take time for people to absorb.

Today’s readings look at life in the early church as it struggled with one of its most critical decisions at the first Council of Jerusalem: Should full church membership be offered to the Gentile communities being evangelized by missionaries Paul and Barnabas? The consensus was that Gentiles did not need to submit to the Torah, circumcision and other Jewish requirements in order to be welcomed into the church. The only requirement was faith in Jesus and in his saving death and resurrection. Without this key decision at the start, the church would have remained a sect within Judaism instead of a universal outreach to anyone drawn to Jesus and the Gospel.

Fierce arguments over having separate Eucharists for Jewish and Gentile converts had brought Peter and Paul to open conflict and had threatened the unity of the church. In the end, these complex issues were resolved in unanimity because the Holy Spirit had clearly blessed the missionary efforts.

The expansion of the church was blessed by the active presence of the risen Jesus, whose healing and reconciling gifts flowed freely from the hands of the missionaries.

These graces duplicated the many signs and wonders of the Gospel story of Jesus as cripples were healed and opposition by trial and imprisonment failed to stop the transformed preachers from proclaiming Jesus as the Christ.

Most remarkable about the accounts of the Council of Jerusalem was the confidence of the “whole church” that God was with them and that their decisions were reached by “us and the Holy Spirit,” with an outpouring of joy and freedom. Likewise, the members of the movement shared the spirit of friendship with Jesus. Love went far beyond obedience or fear of a mountaintop God. Jesus had been among them sharing our humanity. He had submitted to death on the cross to affirm the unconditional mercy of God for sinners. He had loved them not as servants but as friends and he had told them to love one another as the sign he was one with God.

Theirs was an overpowering experience of being chosen, named, loved and sent into the ancient world. It is this same love flowing from a Jesus who is always with his church and a Spirit that has now moved Pope Francis to call believers to the same synodal church. God is alive in the love shared by those who walk together, encountering the truth in each other and trusting God to help them apply the Gospel to the hard questions of our day.

We are now, after all, the very same church, and as we anticipate Pentecost, we must trust that the Holy Spirit will come as promised to fill us with the courage we need to hand on our faith as the first generation did. Where would we be without their example and courage?

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