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Away from the cliff

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Scripture for Life

Unless you have been living in absolute isolation for the past year, you know about the "fiscal cliff." The term is popular shorthand for the financial conundrum that the U.S. government faced at the end of 2012, when the Budget Control Act of 2011 was scheduled to take effect. Hyped incessantly by the media, the so-called fiscal cliff was purported to be an economic Armageddon whose effects would be grave and far-reaching.



In today's sacred texts, our attention is drawn to another "cliff" of sorts, one that could have severely impacted the unity and continuity of the early church. In those first decades after Jesus' resurrection, his followers faced what might be described as an "ethnic cliff."

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23
John 14:23-29
Jews were accustomed to thinking of themselves as God's chosen ones, and so they were, but they had also grown used to thinking that gentiles were beyond the pale of God's saving concerns. Even though the prophets shared visions of a universal community, and even though Jesus had gone out of his way to minister to gentiles and praise them for their faith, some were still stymied by the "ethnic cliff." If they

could not overcome their centuries-old distrust of gentiles, their preaching of the universal love of God and Jesus? saving death would be contradicted by their own prejudices.

Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Silas and many others made great efforts to avert an ethnic cliff that could have threatened the survival of the church -- efforts that are reflected in the Christian scriptures.

In today?s first reading, Luke recounts his version of the Council of Jerusalem. While some Jewish Christians were insisting that gentiles must accept Moses, the law, the prophets and circumcision before becoming Christian, others understood that such a demand was tantamount to saying that Jesus? saving death on the cross was not sufficient for salvation. While each side clung to its own ideas, little progress was made; but when all gave themselves over in prayer and surrendered to the Holy Spirit, they were able to negotiate the ethnic cliff in a manner that continues to challenge our own parochialism and prejudice.

We are also challenged by the vision set before us by the author of Revelation (second reading). By God?s design, the Seer witnessed the heavenly Jerusalem, with its 12 gates, open in all directions to welcome not only the 12 tribes of Israel, but all the 12 apostles of the Lamb. With God?s own glory to illumine it, the holy, heavenly city is open to all without distinction. But lest we suppose that the universal character of the holy city is relegated to heavenly realms, it is good for us to remember that the Seer believed that his vision was to be realized on Earth, for the earthly city is a true reflection of its heavenly counterpart.

In those times when we realize that we distort rather than reflect, and segregate rather than integrate, we turn to the Spirit whom Jesus has given us. The Spirit is God?s personal pledge of grace, within each of us and in all of us together. No one has a monopoly on the Spirit. There is not any good heart where the Spirit refuses to abide and to breathe the very life-breath of God.

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