

Sixth Sunday of Easter ~ 5/13

"Certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them." (Acts 15:1-2)

If we are living under the illusion that all was happiness and harmony in the early church this reading is important. Paul and Barnabas, Peter and James, and many other members of the early church were in conflict with one another at times. Yes, they all believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ who would bring new life but they did not always agree about how they were to further Christ's mission.

The church was expanding rapidly in the world, and it was not just the Jewish world. The Spirit had taken the apostles into the Gentile world as well. Now the question was, what do we expect of these Gentiles? Are there certain rituals that they must perform in order to be one with the Jewish church? Some thought that they needed to be circumcised. Others did not. And, of course, when two sides don't agree there is bound to be conflict. Eventually this conflict will be framed in the light of the Spirit, who will always seek to include more people into the church. Eventually they decide that the Gentiles would not have to be circumcised as long as they followed other important precepts of the fledgling church.

So what does this reading say to us in our day and time? Perhaps it suggests that when we are not sure which way the Spirit wants us to move we need to remember that the church is meant to spread out to the whole world. If the decisions that we are making will help that to happen then that is probably a pretty good indicator that the Spirit is moving us.

This does not mean that the core values and beliefs of our faith can be thrown out the window. But perhaps it means that those things that we have come to value as representative of our faith may not be absolutely necessary for my neighbor's faith journey. All of the wonderful rituals and prayers that we may find enriching and Spirit-filled may not be the kind of things that another person will find fulfilling. Perhaps there are other prayers or actions that speak more loudly to them. The trick is to be open to our neighbors and particularly to the Spirit within them.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What prayers and rituals do I find helpful that may not speak at all to my neighbor?*
- 2. How open am I to changes in my church that will allow more faithful followers to feel included?*

Prayer: Spirit of openness, rest within my heart so that I can see beyond my ownwill to the vision that You desire.