

Fifth Sunday of Easter – April 29, 2018

Acts of the Apostles 9: 26-41 1 John 3: 18-24 John 15: 1-8

An insight that I have learned from St. Ignatius of Loyola is that we can grow in our appreciation of the Scriptures when we use our imaginations. Our imaginations allow us to develop the characters in the story or amplify some of the details. I thought that this account we heard today from the Acts of the Apostles is a particularly good example of what can be done in this fashion.

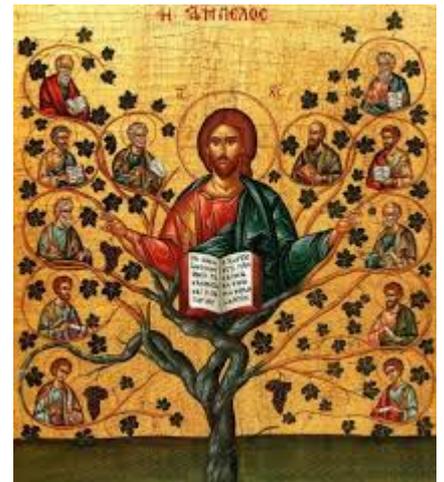
The Christian community in Jerusalem is fearful because Paul has arrived on the scene. Paul had a earlier negative reputation because he had attempted to destroy the Christian community. The reports were that he had undergone a conversion experience and had actually been preaching the Gospel message. But the Jerusalem community did not really know Paul, nor were they convinced about his conversion.

The event that is recalled today occurred about three years after Paul's apparent conversion. Paul, himself, mentions this in his letter to the Galatians. The ones whom he came to meet were still skeptical, and rightly so. Had Paul really changed? Could they really trust him? Theirs was a very natural reaction.

In addition, from what we can learn in other parts of the Acts and from Paul's own letters, Paul appears to have a rather

challenging personality. I view him as being pushy and being able to be somewhat abrasive. He needed a reference, a recommendation, so we also hear about Barnabas. Barnabas was of Jewish background but was actually from the island of Cyprus. Perhaps he would be more familiar with foreign elements. Barnabas had been living in Jerusalem but was sent to Antioch where Paul had been preaching. He spent about a year there, observing Paul. He introduces Paul and vouches for him. He encourages the Jerusalem community to welcome him because his conversion was genuine. They could trust his sincerity. Despite all of this, Paul and Barnabas later have a falling out. This is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (15:39). They each go their separate way.

All of this puts a little meat on the bones of this story. It shows the dynamics which existed in the early Christian community. A couple of weeks ago we heard the description of what seemed to be an ideal community. Today we have a “nuts and bolts” account of how a very human group of individuals struggles as it grows. It is a dynamic group of believers even though that dynamic could be painful at times.



What, then, makes the difference in a Christian community? What affects the members of the believing community? What brings about the community's purpose of making the reality of God known?

It is in answer to these questions that we find a practical meaning in the description given by Jesus: he is the vine, we

are the branches. What sustains, what gives life to the various branches that we are as Church, is the common and nourishing presence of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Scriptures today we are told to remain in Christ. We are told to remain, to dwell in, to dwell with, to live in and with God's presence in Jesus Christ. Each of us is unique and thus we are as different as each branch on a vine. What we have in common, what binds us and unites us, is that presence, that lived reality, that Body and Blood that nourishes us in the Eucharist. We are joined in this communion. We are one with Jesus Christ who is the revelation of God.

We hear today, as well, that we are to ask what we want, and it will be granted. This is not to be misunderstood as a desire for material things or for perfect health, or for everything to go just as we think it ought to be. Rather, it is to ask for wisdom, for insight, for an appreciation of who and what we are as creatures of God. It is the desire to know how we can best live out this gift of life fully and generously as branches given the living presence from the vine who is Jesus Christ.

We are and we will be different. We may often blend together well, or not so well at other times. At times we might be abrasive or difficult. But what we have in common and what is to be respected by us and among us is the faith, the lifeblood of what we are as branches joined with the vine, Jesus Christ. As in the early Christian community, there will be need for patience, trust and openness. There will also be need, on occasion, for pruning in order to assure growth. But in sincerely and confidently allowing the presence of Jesus

Christ to flow through the different branches that we are, we will be able successfully to make known and reveal our truly good and gracious God.