

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord of all people, Jesus who is called the Christ, amen.

Most of our Church Council meetings are pretty bland and some are even flat out boring. I mean we can discuss the fine points of wearing facemasks for hours! We've been discussing changes to our Church Constitution for almost 3 years now... Nothing in the modern Church happens very quickly. In fact one of the tricks I've picked up over the years is when there's a controversial issue, I usually suggest we form a committee and study the problem for a while and then ask the committee to provide an update and a recommendation. That forces a review and when or if the issue comes up again it will come with a single recommendation. Often times I've discovered this leads to the issue being killed by committee or at least put off until everyone's had time to consider the issue...

That's not what the Apostles and elders of the early Church did with respect to the mission to the Gentiles. They addressed the issue with much debate and discussion and in the end made some historic decisions. For those of you who have been recording secretaries for our Church Council, did you ever think while you were documenting the monthly Church meetings that your words might be recorded for all of future history to read? For those who have been council members, did you ever think the decisions you make and the votes you cast might change and define the Church forever? My guess is the disciples, Apostles and

elders of the Church in Jerusalem never imagined their decisions would forever define the trajectory Church would take for the next 2000 years and counting....

A few weeks ago, we read about how the new Church solved the unequal distribution of food to the widows and poor. Now the issue is how do we include all these new folks into our community. The mission outreach of the Church had been one fine tuned machine when all they were doing was reaching out to the Jews in Jerusalem and the Jews in other cities and regions. All these converts shared the same background religion and faith including their faith practices and the Laws of Moses. Since they were all Jews already they were already circumcised and they already knew and mostly practiced the Mosaic laws regarding food and ritual cleanliness. This is not so with all the new Gentile converts. They knew nothing about the Jewish ways or practices. Last week we heard about the first Gentile conversion with the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. His conversion didn't cause much if any stir because he was on his way back to Ethiopia. If you know your Book of Acts you might remember that back in Chapter 10 Peter had a dream where all kinds of animals were lowered from heaven on a sheet and Peter was instructed not once or twice, but three times by God to eat. From that dream Peter knew God wanted him and God's new Church to accept the Gentiles because God did not create anything unclean. Sin may spoil God's creation, but the creation wasn't created defiled... So, after his dream, Peter

baptized Cornelius and his entire household. This opened up the mission to the Gentiles for Peter and the other Apostles. I'm not sure they ever thought the Gentiles would respond in such a huge way to the Gospel. They were unprepared for the onslaught of new converts and this created a crisis for the Church.

When the Pandemic first hit over a year ago our Council met in emergency session. Several of us had studied the WHO and CDC recommendations and had put together a list of precautions and restrictions that we must do in order to have Worship Services. We couldn't push this issue off to some committee for further study. We needed to take action and we did. As a result, we began with outdoor worship and then added speakers and a radio transmitter for folks to listen from their vehicles. Only after careful consideration and many discussions and debates did we decide it was safe enough to return to indoor services. That was the kind of crisis the early Church faced with all these new Gentile converts.

Some 2000 years later we look at their issues and snicker or smile. I mean who worries about whether someone is circumcised or not today... Maybe parents of a newborn have to make a decision, but they don't make that decision thinking about their son's future religious identity. Yet, that was what was at stake, the very identity of the Church. Circumcision was the sign given by God so that the Chosen People would have their own unique identity. They would be separated out from the rest of humanity and blessed by God in order to be a blessing to the

rest of the world. By the way, circumcision wasn't the only Law of Moses we're talking about here. There were over 613 laws recorded in the book of Leviticus alone. Jesus had personally thrown out the laws regarding eating of ritually unclean foods. He told the Pharisees it wasn't what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of your mouth because that comes from your heart.

Speaking of Pharisees, who let them in the Church? These were the same ones who opposed Jesus right from the start and now apparently some of them have converted to Christianity... The problem is they didn't leave their old ideas behind. They're still advocating that all Christians must first become fully Jewish, observing every law and ordinance in order to become disciples of Jesus Christ. Yes, that included circumcision, but also all the cleanliness laws regarding lepers and women and eating certain shellfish and many, many others. The laws and rules were so onerous they couldn't possibly be all kept perfectly.

One thing I love about the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is the vindication of Peter. I mean, in the Gospels, Peter is sort of a bumbling fool. He opens his mouth and blurts out the first thing that comes to his mind. It's usually wrong and he frequently gets reprimanded by Jesus. Peter denied Jesus on the night of his betrayal three separate times and even unsuccessfully tries to walk on water. In the Book of Acts Peter preaches and thousands are converted. He

performs healing miracles and seems to be in the right place at just the right time. He's still learning, but by the time of Acts, Peter has indeed become what Jesus dubbed him, the Rock of the Church. Normally we associate salvation by Grace with the preaching of Paul, but today we see Peter finally gets it. I'm pretty sure that if Peter hadn't said his peace about salvation coming through God's Grace and not through keeping of the Law, we would have a very different Church than we have today. I mean, for one thing, bacon would be out of the question even for breakfast. Have any of you ever been to Israel? Breakfast is not the same when the eggs come with a side of chicken or fish...

Here's what the early Church decided, and I believe they got it right... The Law, including circumcision, gave the Jewish people their identity, but their salvation was still by the grace of God. For us, and for all the Gentile converts to Christianity from the early Church to today, we are also saved by the Grace of God. The difference is that our identity comes from a different sign. Our identity doesn't come from whether we're circumcised or not, it comes from our Baptism. Jesus commanded a different sign for his Church to follow. Let me be clear on this point, a Baptized person is a person who has received God's gift of salvation. Does Baptism save, no. It is God who saves, and Baptism is a visible sign of that invisible reality. Baptism removes any and all doubt regarding your ultimate salvation. You are Baptized therefore you are saved. That is our identity as

disciples of Jesus Christ. He commanded his Church in Matthew Chapter 28 to Go into all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

May your Baptism give you the peace of mind to know you are a loved and cherished child of God. May the Church always have leaders who boldly follow God's Holy Spirit in leading the Church into the mission Jesus gave to her.

Thanks be to God that when we faced the crisis of Corona God raised us leaders right here in our tiny country Church that led with confidence because they heard and followed our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. May we continue to seek His voice and follow where He leads. Amen.