

## THE SECOND BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH

Texts on Sunday, May 26, 2013

*Acts 15: 1-21; John 14: 25-27*

**H**ave you ever had to reinvent yourself? I have. I am sure that many of you have. The phrase has a peculiarly American flavor, as if oneself were the hero of the whole project—designer, director, and finished product. But re-invention is just a phrase; the experience to which it refers has always belonged to the human predicament. Of such is the story of Arjuna—Odysseus—Jacob—Job—Jesus in the wilderness—Jesus before the Cross. Re-invention comes to this. Your hopes and values, your skills and habits prove inadequate to the present situation. Something's got to give. As we have said here before, when facing great loss, the options before us are two: either misery, or spiritual growth; either despair, or a possibility.

An identity crisis so absolute has faced me in the aftermath of a divorce; in having career plans dashed; and more. On Memorial Day, countless wives and mothers and fathers, and now husbands too, remember the rupture in oneself brought by the news of a beloved soldier's death. If the term "re-inventing yourself" is not altogether wrong, that is because we do not passively undergo an automatic transformation to new skills, new commitments, new values and hopes. These do not come as butterfly wings come upon a caterpillar, or birth to a baby. No, one who commits herself to herself when all seems blocked, one who then swears loyalty to her own being, come what may, change what must, that one chooses to stand somehow on God's side of life, where there comes into view a door not seen before, and a key.

We know a great deal of the personal experience of new life of this kind. It is the substance of our greatest stories. But we have less acquaintance with new life in organizations, when it comes to projects we join with other people. Our marriages, our workplaces, our churches and cities and even our nation all afford us, as individuals, the option of just quitting or just not caring anymore. Therefore, many of us never experience the transformation of an organization as it confronts a crisis of its identity, its mission. But it does happen. At Riverside, it must happen. Riverside needs to go over Jordan. You cannot get to the other side of the Riverside except you undergo this mystery of death and life. So I'd like to tell you a story central to the beginning of God's church, one hidden a bit behind the power of Pentecost.

Pentecost is the festival celebrating the story in Acts 2 where God Holy Spirit enables men from scores of nations to speak and understand the gospel in spite of language barriers. Christians like to call this the birthday of the church, but here is a puzzle: Pentecost was a Jewish holiday to commemo-

rate God's giving the ten commandments on Mount Sinai. Therefore, no surprise, the story says that everyone listening to Peter on Pentecost was a Jew. The thousands baptized that day . . . were Jews. Now, things born usually grow up to be the same sort of creature they started out to be on their birthday. If Pentecost was the church's birthday, and it was born for Jews, when did it undergo some sort of new birth to become a house for all nations?

Today, you heard about that new birth. Many years have passed since Pentecost, and again the scene is Jerusalem. Still, all the figures assembled for the Council are Jews—Jews for whom Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. In the room is Jesus' brother James, to whom all show the greatest honor. But now a big question has landed in the assembly. Are we just for Jews, or does the wing of God's promise shelter also the "Gentiles"—the non-Jews? That's all that that word means: people not part of us; or, "the other nations"; or, those destitute of God's promise. Here is an organizational identity crisis: Does God carry *all* people as if on eagles' wings, or just our people? Who is God for? Who are we for? Who is "we" anyway?

What a moment! The question comes to James and the Council from Peter and Paul and Barnabas. They have not been going to church in Jerusalem each Sunday. They haven't been going to council meetings. They have been out in the world with uncircumcised strangers, with believers in other gods, with women, rich and poor, with the unclean, with soldiers, academics, skeptics, laborers . . . Out there, they have witnessed gifts of Holy Spirit manifest in many regardless of any sign in their flesh. Now they are convinced that circumcision in the flesh matters not; that being Jewish, a tradition good, beautiful and true, is not the whole plan of God's provision of life; for God makes no distinctions, for God is for all. Are we? What will James say?

If he says, *No, men, you have misunderstood what you have seen. It is a false enthusiasm. The uncircumcised cannot receive the gifts of the Spirit through Christ*—if he says that, and if Peter and Paul hear the ruling and obey, then all history is going to roll down a different hill. There will be no Church. The Jesus sect may survive, but its membership rules will kill it before long. This Jesus organization is either going to die, or live. Everything hangs on the question, Is God for all, or is God for some? What a moment!

We know how this one goes. James reaches the decision "not to trouble [with circumcision] those Gentiles who are turning to God." If he sounds a bit reluctant, think about what he is doing. He is the head of the Council. The Council can dismiss the claims of these apostles as the personal opinions of passionate do-gooders who want the Council to pass resolutions that go way outside its norms, ignoring all its history and investments in tradition and the scriptures. But James takes the risk of re-inventing the Church. He takes

upon himself the risk of re-interpreting the tradition. He draws up beautiful pearls from Amos and Jeremiah to support his decision. He takes responsibility for having believed that God's law was against the uncircumcised. He takes responsibility for changing his mind, and reading God's word in a new way. James was midwife to a new church, a second birth. Will you become midwife to a new church through a second birth? They give lessons, you know.

The first lesson is tough. The Bible will not tell you what to think or what to do. James' Bible said all the children of God must be circumcised. But James' Bible also included *Deuteronomy*, written 700 years after Moses to help re-invent a Temple tradition in ruins. Contra *Exodus*, *Deuteronomy's* Moses tells the people, "The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live." (Deu 30.6) Here, circumcision is already no longer a cutting thing, but a spiritual thing—hundreds of years before Paul wrote to Rome that "real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal." (Rom 2.29) Face it. The whole Bible shows the faithful taking the risk to re-interpret the Bible, to re-invent their people for new situations. There is no rule to tell you when to turn from the letter of the law to the living God and trust the Spirit.

The second lesson lights the way. When you decide you will take part in a new birth of the church, you are not alone. You *must* not be! On one hand, you need to pray for Holy Spirit guidance to see aright what is the way forward, so different from the past. But if your vision is yours alone, if none see it with you, then you have good reason to doubt its source. But James is not alone. No, the head of the Council is not even in the lead here. Peter and Paul are, and soon it is they who will be invested with powers to open up the new church. The second lesson for the church is that when you take the risk to re-interpret the tradition for a new situation, you are not alone. Listen to those who carry the widest, wildest dreams for God's love and justice.

A third lesson is short to state but long to live out. To see what God is doing for all, we need to see when what we are doing for ourselves is not right, not anymore. That's what James did. If we do not trust that God is good, we cannot see where we've gone bad. We're too afraid, too defended. It is a spiritual law for persons as well as for organizations: If we love our old life more than we love God; if we fear change more than we fear God, then God's future cannot come to us. There can be no second birth, but just an ordinary death awaits. Yet what a miracle of life awaits those who by grace see the way by which they have come, and give it up. That's what James did.

The last lesson is perhaps the plainest. The people at the center of the early church—James and the Council of elders charged with guarding the tradition—did not get outside the Church; did not meet the uncircumcised; and did not encounter the Spirit of God alive in all the wrong places. The Church discovered its future outside of itself through passionate pioneers, Peter and Paul and Barnabas, who went way wide of acceptable norms. Now, in hindsight, it is easy to see that God was already out there, way ahead of the first church, waiting for them to leave their cocoon. But forget hindsight. What about insight for our church, our city, our times? If now, as then, God is not sending many people *into* the churches; if now, as then, that church is in trouble which only accepts members who come to them on their own terms; then we have all the evidence we need that it is once more time to re-invent ourselves and become a true *ekklesia*. The word combines two Greek words, meaning “called out.” We are not called-in, but people called out.

How can the church go out from itself, and to whom shall we go, and with what word or action? Responses to these questions are too important for me to fill in the blanks. Come together to do that work. And remember that *you have done this going-out thing*. Not long ago, gay and lesbian were like the uncircumcised of the first church. But no longer, for you re-interpreted the tradition according to its greater lights. It took courage to break down the dividing wall. It took courage for gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to step into this community that we all might see one another in compassion and equality. Now, our eyes must open to possibilities just as transformative, just as difficult to imagine for those accustomed to being on the inside.

A closing counsel. As you bring new servants alongside your ministry, be careful how much of the old business of the church you give them to tend, for the old business keeps a person inside at a desk. The new church is out there, and of this I am sure: Whatever people of God commit themselves to their identity in Christ when all seems blocked; whatever churches then swear loyalty to their own being in Christ, come what may, change what must, such churches choose to stand out there on God’s side of life, where there will come into view a door not seen before, and a key, and a second birth.

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