

## The Council of Jerusalem

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

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by

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A tourist is separated from his tour group in the Sahara desert. After a long morning in the hot sun, he comes upon a nomad traveling by donkey. "Please help me!" the tourist begs. "I'm dying of thirst." "I'm sorry," the nomad replies. "I have **no** water. All I have are these beautiful neckties which I will happily sell you." "Neckties!" the thirsty man cries. "I need water, not neckties." "Look," the nomad offers. "I feel badly for you, so here's what I'm going to do. I normally get \$25 for **one** of these pure silk neckties. But seeing as you're suffering, I'll let you have **two** of them for \$35." The tourist turns away in disgust and continues in search of water. Sometime later, he stumbles upon an oasis and surprisingly, there before him is a grand hotel and restaurant. By now he's crawling on his hands and knees and collapses in front of a man in a tuxedo, standing under a palm tree. "Please, please, do you have any water?" "Yes sir," the maitre d' replies, "we have **plenty** of cold water." "Oh, thank God," the poor guy sighs, "Where do I go?" "This way sir. The restaurant is right inside. But unfortunately sir, no one is admitted without a necktie."

We can sympathize with the Gentile Christians from our first reading in the Book of Acts, who like our exasperated tourist, must have felt that the Jewish Christians were confronting them with one **obstacle** after another, before they could finally say they were genuine Christians. Paul's success was such that Gentiles were becoming Christians in greater numbers than the Jews, eventually outnumbering the Jewish converts. Around 49 A.D., the debate reached a tipping point, and the early church had to decide whether Gentile converts **must** follow the Jewish law and submit to circumcision. At first to be a Christian meant to be a Jew with a few peculiar beliefs about Jesus. So Christian Jews continued to attend synagogue and the Temple and follow the Jewish traditions, especially the kosher food rules. Paul decides to take the question to the highest authority in Jerusalem...the original apostles. This will be the most important meeting held in Christian history, for it decided the question of whether Christianity would be a minor Jewish sect or would soon become a separate religion reaching to the ends of the earth. One wonders whether Christianity as we know it, would even be here today if the Council of Jerusalem had decided to require male circumcision. However, I think it's safe to say there would be far **fewer** adult men today in RCIA. But as Peter, James, and Paul argued from the Hebrew Scriptures, God always intended to include Gentiles because the underlying message, attributed to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is that salvation is universally bestowed as a free gift to all people. We are **all** saved by grace received in faith. The inclusion of the Gentiles did not mean the replacement of Israel, but its expansion. The Gentiles were asked to abstain from certain practices, such as eating food sacrificed to pagan idols, which might have offended a Jewish sense of cultic purity, so by removing these social barriers, Jewish and Gentile Christians could freely associate, share hospitality, eat with each other, and live at peace in a **single** Church. It must have been incredibly difficult for Jewish Christians to surrender their ancient religious traditions, which defined them, such as circumcision. So there must have been resistance

along the lines of a famous Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown is standing alongside Lucy who has a stern expression on her face. Charlie Brown pleads with her: "Lucy, you must be more loving. This world really needs love. You have to let yourself love to make this world a better place." Lucy whirls around, knocks Charlie Brown to the ground and screams at him, "Look, Blockhead. The **world** I love: it's **people** I can't stand."

At this Council, the apostles were calling on the Church to acknowledge the **new** thing God was doing, even if it scandalized them and seemed to go against scripture and tradition. Paul was arguing from his own personal experience, narrating all the signs and wonders God had done through him among the Gentiles, especially that they had received the Holy Spirit, even though they had **not** observed the Law. The question our reading from Acts poses for us, is, are we willing to let the Gospel expand beyond the boundaries of our own limited comfort zone? The only standard for Christian inclusivity is faith working through love. Jesus subverted the conventional religious wisdom of his time. We as church are called to do the same. As Peter Gomes, a Professor of Christian Morals and a black gay campus minister at Harvard University, writes, "If the gospel is truly good news, it has to be good news for everyone, for it is either an inclusive gospel or **no** gospel at all. At this Council we meet a God who wants radical inclusion so that both insiders and outsiders can be part of the same divinely inspired faith community, a God whose awesome goodness refuses to be boxed in by human fears, cynicism, or prejudices and who thankfully doesn't always do, what we think God **should** do." Thus the question for the Church should always be who can we invite **in**, **not** who can we kick **out**. We are challenged to eliminate an "us versus them" mentality. Who is **our** them, **our** unclean, **our** untouchables today, both in our church and in our daily lives?

The early Church was caught in the middle of a deep conflict as to what to believe and follow: the word of God according to Scripture or the word of God according to the Holy Spirit. Ideally the two should **not** be in conflict, but because the Bible was both written and interpreted by fallible human beings, the Scriptures have been used at times as a tool of oppression to support a distorted cultural status quo inadvertently transforming the Church into an exclusive fellowship of shared prejudice. The Council decided that Scripture really calls us to pay attention to the Holy Spirit and to follow her lead. The Council warns us that the Church must always be a listening community, for when it **fails** to listen, it runs the risk of substituting its **own** convictions, for what **God** intends through the Holy Spirit. The revelation of the Holy Spirit at the Council was that it is better to be compassionate and welcoming rather than religiously right. This is reminiscent of the little girl in Sunday school who was busily drawing with all her crayons when her teacher asked her what she was creating. "I am drawing a picture of God," she said. Her teacher replied, "But, my dear, nobody knows what God looks like." To which the little girl replied without stopping her strokes, "They will when I'm finished." The Council draws us a picture of God who does not exclude, discriminate, or play favorites. Who God accepts, the Church **must** accept. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to ways we have tried to confine God's love to conventional standards that we humans have set. As Church, we are called to give witness to God's love wherever we find it. "We've never done it that way before" is no longer a valid excuse. If the accustomed order of things needs to be rearranged to shake us out of our biases or narrow view of God's plan, the Holy Spirit **will** intervene. Because the love of God has no

boundaries, the Holy Spirit will break down the barriers between Gentiles and Jews, women and men, poor and rich, healthy and sick, young and old, gay and straight.

I can't help but believe that if the Church had continued to follow this plan of radical inclusion, we wouldn't be in the tragedy we are in today, vis-à-vis the clergy sexual abuse scandal. We can only pray that the Spirit might inspire the Church to look at our text as a model of understanding and receptivity in helping resolve the thorny sexual and gender issues facing her today. As Church, we are called to accept **other** people's experiences of God, even if they differ from our own, because ultimately they all derive from the same God who prizes diversity. God's family must be open to **whosoever**, no matter **whatsoever**. All we can do is tell our own story, what God has done for **us**, praying that others through the Holy Spirit will recognize the divine presence guiding us and see our faithful response to God's intervention in our lives. Our modern Church must be open to the surprises of an unbiased God, who breaks down old divisions and creates new possibilities of community, where we all belong to one another, every one, from the pope down to the loneliest homeless person on the planet. The Vietnamese have a folk saying that there is only one difference between heaven and hell. In hell, the chopsticks are three feet long and people can't eat. In heaven they also have chopsticks three feet long, but the people feed each other

So it is the **nature** of the Holy Spirit to upset the status quo in our individual and communal lives and at times to **discomfort** us spiritually. If the early Christians, so close in time to Jesus, could be so unprepared and astounded by the Spirit's innovative initiatives, what might the Spirit have in store for **us** today? Our text reminds us that every action and movement of the Spirit is motivated by no other concern than God's love for all people. And so Jesus invites everyone to his table. Here all are embraced, accepted, and loved. To this altar we bring all our unwelcome journeys in our lives which have caused us pain and isolation, receiving God's healing which shatters the brokenness, ostracism, and confusion emanating from such phrases as "you are not one of us," whether it comes from a bully on the school playground to scapegoating illegal immigrants to writing a nasty comment on Facebook. At this Eucharist, we hear God's promise never to abandon anyone and the divine wish that every person be included equally in the Church, no matter who they are or how far they may have fallen or been worn down by life. We are nourished, so we can journey together and as a faith community we can nourish each other with that cup of cold water we each need and for which we are each searching. Every person made in the image of God is precious because they reveal an aspect of God we might never have otherwise known. So everyone **must** be included if we are to learn as much about God as we possibly can and to find God's presence, grace, and compassion for **us** in the people and places we **least** expect.