

**Sermon Easter 6 B, 2009**

**St. John's Church, Jamaica Plain**

**The Rev. Anne Mansfield Minton**

If you remember the movie, Apollo 13, you probably also remember one of the world's great understatements. Tom Hanks, having just learned the extent of the looming catastrophe on board, says to the NASA officials back on earth: "Houston, we have a problem!" Boy, do they ever!

I was reminded of that exchange when I read today's first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles. The early church is barely birthed and immediately there is a problem. Or, at the very least, a major challenge! The earliest followers of Jesus were, like Jesus, faithful Jews. They took on the responsibility of the Mosaic law, they observed the dietary rules. We are told that the early disciples, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, worshiped in the Temple in Jerusalem and prayed in their local synagogues. They were followers of the Way, as the Jesus group came to be called, and preached Jesus as Savior, risen from the dead. But they were also Jews in their prayer and practice.

They may well have assumed that the new movement of which they were a part, would remain Jewish. This was their world. This was their spiritual home. But we hear today that their assumptions are overturned by

the Holy Spirit- powerfully and dramatically! And quickly! The Holy Spirit and the Spirit's gifts are poured out upon the Gentiles in today's story from Acts. And, this continued to be the experience of the early church.

God lavished grace, demonstrable gifts and power upon Gentiles. So, the first big fight in the church, which is more politely called the Council of Jerusalem, took place less than 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The agenda of the Council looked something like this:

**Question-** Do we admit Gentiles to the fellowship?

And, do they need to become Jews first before they become Christians?

We know what was decided at the Council, but because we know how it was resolved we may underestimate the huge step this was for Jewish Christians to welcome non-Jews and not require that they observe the Mosaic law, which had been the foundation and support of their own spiritual lives and their relationship with God. They chose to admit people profoundly different from themselves.

Then time rolled on and the Christian movement spread rapidly around the Mediterranean and within the Roman Empire. Not without conflicts and persecutions, but spread it did. To illustrate its dramatic growth, just consider that, in the Roman Empire at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup>

century it was illegal to BE a Christian and at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century it was illegal NOT to be!

At that point the church might well have thought: “So far so good!” But, soon we come to the next challenge. Does the church admit barbarians- by which the Romans meant anyone who was not apart of the Empire. Eventually, the decision was made to baptize the barbarians and bring them into the Christian community.

But, the problem/challenge/opportunity persists. When the European Christians came to the Americas they encountered the native peoples. Some wanted to baptize the peoples whom they met, but others were concerned that the indigenous people did not have souls, and so could not be baptized- were genetically unfit, in other words, for baptism.

And it goes on- debates about slavery, where many church leaders came down on the wrong side, questions about the inclusion of women in leadership, and now gay and lesbian people in ordained ministry, especially the episcopacy, and advocacy for full equality for all people, including the right to marry.

I remember a number of years ago, someone who opposed the ordination of gay and lesbian people saying that Gene Robinson was the most dangerous person in the church. What he meant by that was that Gene

was so clearly blessed by God, had so many gifts for leadership that it was hard to argue against ordaining him a bishop. The person did continue to argue against it, but just wanted everyone to know it was difficult to do!

Now, I really like this reading from Acts! I am a Gentile. And, being a Celt of Irish descent, the Romans would have called me a barbarian. It's obvious that I am a woman, ordained a priest. And most of you know that I am a lesbian, married to my partner of almost 30 years. So, this inclusion thing is really working for me! And many of us may hear this reading as a word of comfort, having been treated badly in the past by communities which excluded and belittled us, and taught many of us to be ashamed or angry about who God has fashioned us to be. So, this scripture is a consolation.

But, like all scripture it is also a challenge. And that's also what we hear this morning, We are told to look for the presence and the power of God in the person, to make decisions based on God's grace in the person, not our comfort level or agreed upon standards or inherited and deeply cherished prejudices.

The Holy Spirit pours out gifts on people we don't like and sometimes don't approve of. I know that the Holy Spirit's gifts are poured out on people who vote differently from me, who have chosen different

paths, who would disagree with much of my theology and I with theirs. In other words, the Holy Spirit invites into the community people whom I would prefer to exclude. God invites people I might not even want to have dinner with and here they are part of my church, and the Bible promises, they will also be part of my eternal reward- with reserved seats in heaven!

We are reminded this morning that **God** shapes the church. **God** invites to fellowship. **God** gives gifts for ministry. And every time we think we have made the boundaries secure, established the perimeters we like and have a nice comfortable collection of souls, God invites a whole lot of other people and the story goes on.

We are told to continue looking for God's presence, inviting, welcoming, being shaped by God together and then sent out to bring God's saving word to yet more people who long to hear it, and welcome them in and so the story goes on....and on....and on, until God calls us home.

May it be so.

Amen.