

Provisions for the Journey to Pentecost

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Fifth Week of Easter, 2024



Sunday, April 28: *When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple (Acts 9:26-31).*

Saul's "defection to the other side" is a big win for the disciples. Think about when a successful sports figure signs with the rival team, or a die-hard member of one political party switches sides. The "receiving" side usually makes a big deal about it. But understandably, the disciples are skeptical. What if this is just a ruse? After all, this is the one who oversaw Stephen's murder. And what about all those followers of "The Way" he turned over to the authorities? This guy, Saul, has done some major damage. Should we accept him into our ranks? Shouldn't he be forced to pay for his crimes?

The disciples are wise to observe Saul for a while, to assess whether his conversion is real. They allow for time so they can "judge him by his fruits." I wonder if there are some disciples who want him to pay his dues for the wrongs he has committed. It is never explicitly said in Acts, but I like to think Saul asks for forgiveness. I imagine his already zealous personality becomes even more intense by his desire to atone for his sins.

Today's Provision: Forgiveness. Being cautious about opening the door to someone who has hurt you is wise. Even though we are called to be "fools for Christ," I don't think Jesus expects us to be foolish by inviting more hurt from someone whose heart has not changed. We ask God to help us discern and assess the genuineness of a person's conversion. We look for signs and fruits of repentance. We pray that by offering forgiveness, the person who has hurt us will be extra careful not to hurt us again; great growth can even occur. Is there someone you need to forgive? Even if they are no longer part of your life, in the end, forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves. Pray for the grace to forgive.

Monday, April 29: *"Judas, not the Iscariot, asked, 'Master, what happened that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?'" (Jn 14:21-26).*

Have you ever noticed Jesus rarely answers a question directly, at least in the way that we want him to? "Well, here's the deal, Judas, I'm revealing myself just to you and not to the rest of the world because..." The real question behind Judas' inquiry is likely about understanding why Jesus is not the powerful ruler Israel is expecting. "Why don't you show your power to the whole world?" Or, as we hear a little while later, "Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (Mk 15:32). Sorry, but we are not going to get easy answers. Jesus' response to Judas' question comes down to two words: freewill and faith.

Today's Provision: The answer is faith. Jesus desires friends, not slaves (Jn 15:15). It is up to each of us to use our freewill, to show our love for Jesus by keeping his word: Loving others. As we read yesterday in John's First Letter, "Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth" (although we could really use a lot more love in word and speech these days as well!). It all comes down to faith: faith in the love of God, faith in the mercy of God when our freewill leads us to deny that love. Look for opportunities today to demonstrate your faith. "Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe" (St. Augustine).

Tuesday, April 30: *They had proclaimed the good news to that city and made a considerable number of disciples (Acts 14:19-28).*

There are at least seven references in Acts to the number of people the disciples add to the ranks of Christ's followers. We humans are so obsessed with numbers, myself included: "How many people came to the retreat or prayer service I gave? How many readers do I have?" Whenever "the numbers" rise in importance to me, I am reminded of the Lord's displeasure with David when he orders a census to be taken (2 Sm 24). David's ego gets in his way (as it does at other times too—take heart!); mine can get in the way too. How about for you? What numbers do you use to judge yourself?

Today's Provision: Focus on what is essential. For some, the numbers are things like our bank accounts, our salaries, our kids' GPAs or accomplishments, or how many "likes" we get on social media. In ministry, we may use the numbers (or lack thereof) to throw up our hands in frustration: "Why am I bothering to do this? No one shows up, no one is interested. I am just wasting my time." If either of these situations apply to you, reflect. If you are in ministry, perhaps it *is* time to try something new, to head off in another direction. But it's just as likely the Spirit is asking you to forget about the numbers and continue to follow her lead. Remember our reflection from last week: God's got this. If you struggle with the role "the numbers" play in your life, focus on what is essential. Pray for the Spirit's consolation.

Wednesday, May 1: *But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law" (Acts 15:1-6).*

You gotta feel for these Pharisees. Think about how big a step they are taking. They have come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but it is oh so hard to let go of their chosen status. "Let's just get everyone on the same page here. Make the Gentiles Jews first, then they can join us." Imagine what might have happened if they had gotten their way. I wonder if the fledgling church would have survived, much less grown. I wonder the same thing today when so many resist change, refusing to be open to those who don't check all the boxes.

Today's Provision: Do you resist change? This is another example of something that requires deep prayer, reflection, and discernment. There are many stories from the early church that parallel our stories today. Change can be hard, and I feel for people who just want things to "go back" to the way they were. But we know: life does not go backwards. Natural law tells us: we change, we grow, or we die. Take time today to consider and pray about areas in your life where you resist change. Pray for the faith to believe the Spirit is making all things new. God's got this!

Thursday, May 2: *After much debate, Peter said, "My brothers, you are well aware God made his choice that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the Gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the Holy Spirit. He made no distinction between us and them. Why, then, are you now putting God to the test?" (Acts 15:7-21).*

Today's Provision: How do you put God to the test? This continues from yesterday's reflection. Do you struggle with this question? I do, and it is a major focus of prayer as I discern where and how the Spirit is leading me. Think about using this question as part of your nightly examen (we talked about this last week as well, based on Peter's words: where have I helped or hindered God, and how have I put God to the test?). In reality, I put God to the test every time I look for pat answers or try to control situations. Use this question for prayer today and see where the Spirit leads.

Friday, May 3: *"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves" (Jn 14:6-14).*

"The works." When we order something at the ballpark or fast-food joint and we say we want it with "the works!" we mean we want it with everything. (There's a joke about a Buddhist going to a hot dog stand on the streets of New York and saying, "Make me one with everything!") 😊 What does Jesus mean when he says we can believe because of "the works?" I'd guess most people think about the miracles he and his disciples perform. Maybe the "numbers" we talked about on Tuesday are grounds for our belief that he is the real deal. For me, it's not the "works" that matter. My belief is based on "the words."

Today's Provision: Why do you believe? Now, a skeptic will say, "How do we know Jesus said all the things the gospels say he said? We don't have any recordings!" No, we don't, and scholars tell us the evangelists did indeed put words from the OT and the prophets "in" Jesus' mouth. We've talked in the past about the three M's of Jesus: most debate has centered around two: Was he really human, a "MAN?" Is he really God, the "MESSIAH?" But the most important thing is his "MESSAGE!" Reflect today: why do you believe? A great answer: I believe because... of everything!

Saturday, May 4: *They traveled through the Phrygian and Galatian territory...During the night Paul had a vision. A Macedonian stood before him and implored him with these words, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we sought passage to Macedonia at once (Act 16:1-10).*

Do you notice the little nuance in this passage? Through the first 15 chapters of Acts, the author (presumed to be Luke) has been cataloging all the disciples' travels and actions. He talks about what **they** have been doing. Now, out of the blue, he puts himself in the scene: "**we** sought passage to Macedonia." It is assumed Luke was a companion to Paul, so it is plausible that he joined Paul and Timothy to travel with them for a time, to get a first-hand view of the goings-on. Interesting little Bible fun fact, but what does it have to do with us?

Today's Provision: Be part of the "we!" Some scholars suggest Luke uses this as a literary device to add more credence to the story and to appeal to people who focus on little, seemingly inconsequential nuances! 😊 But this has a tie-in to our reflection yesterday about why we believe. Do we believe because of what **they**, i.e., the Apostles or the saints of old experienced? Or do we believe because of what **we** experience today, right now, of Christ's living presence through the Spirit? Do we believe that we too are part of the communion of saints—just saints-in-the-making—right now? Our living witness is a source of credence to the story and message of Jesus Christ. Be a witness today.