

If you look through the Kalendar of the Church Year, you will find something very interesting about our Patron Saint, Paul, and his First Century Christian compatriot, Peter ... neither of them has a day devoted to him and only to him.

There is, of course, a feast entitled “The Confession of St. Peter” which commemorates the event when Jesus asked, “Who do people say I am?” and then more pointedly, “Who do you say I am?” Peter’s answer was, “You are the messiah! The son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:13-16) We have a day devoted to celebrating that answer.

And we have a feast, one week later, called “The Conversion of St. Paul” which commemorates Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus when he was confronted by the Risen Lord as he traveled with letters of warrant empowering him to arrest any follower of the way of Jesus. (Acts 9:1-9) We have a day devoted to celebrating the change of heart, mind, and soul that confrontation worked in Paul.

But neither St. Peter nor St. Paul have a day devoted to them as individuals, say, the way St. Alban or St. Francis or many other Christian notables have devoted to them. What we have is the feast which falls this week, the second of our parish’s patronal feasts each year, which honors the two of them together. There must be a reason for the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul - a reason other than Peter and Paul. Why this feast to honor them

both? There must be something common to these two men which speaks to our faith, something which, if we pay heed to it, will draw us more deeply into relationship with God in Christ; Peter and Paul must speak this message more eloquently together than apart.

Consider, for a moment, who these two fellows are: an “apostolic odd couple” who, it seems, were and remained “sparring partners” throughout their common life in the early church. The New Testament clearly shows that Peter and Paul were bitter opponents at one point. The two men could not agree on the issue of whether Gentiles (non-Jews) should be included in the early Christian Church. Peter was certain that the “unclean” Gentiles should not be included in the church, just as Paul had once been certain that all Christians were heretics to be arrested, tried, and put to death.

St. Luke, in relating early church history, tells us about the first council of the Church, the Council of Jerusalem in 50 A.D. Luke tells us that the issue of Gentile membership was settled at that council. It was there that the leadership agreed not to subject the Gentiles to the Mosaic Law, including circumcision; they decide that Gentile Christians would not be required to first convert to Judaism before they could be accepted into the community of Jesus’ followers.

I believe it is marvelous that Luke tells the story of the Jerusalem Council, for it teaches us two great lessons. First, that there has never been

a time, since the very beginning of the church, when the church lived without conflict and disagreement over something – frequently about who is in and who is out. Second, it gives us a model for reaching consensus about and living with our disagreements under the direction of our leaders, particularly our bishops: it was neither Paul nor Peter who settled the issue of Gentile membership, it was James, the brother of Jesus and first bishop of Jerusalem, who actually led the church to a solution.

But insofar as that council, or similar disputations, had an impact upon the lives and strongly held views of these two saints Peter and Paul ... I really doubt that what changed the mind of either man were the logical arguments and reasoned debates of colleagues and opponents. What changed these men and set them and the church on very different paths than they would otherwise have chosen were visions: Peter and Paul both received visions from God which showed them that they had been too narrow in their views of who receives God's salvation.

I've already mention the vision seen by Paul on the road to Damascus, his encounter with the Risen Christ. Here is the way Luke tells that story in the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts:

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the

Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:1-9)

After this, of course, Saul went to Damascus where he was instructed in the Christian faith by Ananias and thereafter began his career as a great missionary and preacher. Saul, who had been so sure that the followers of Jesus should be arrested, tried, and executed as heretics, became Paul the apostle – not because of any reasoned argument – but because of a personal encounter with God, because of a vision.

In the next chapter of Acts, Luke tells the story of Peter’s vision:

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a

trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen..... (Acts 10:9-17)

Immediately after seeing this vision, Peter is confronted by some Gentile believers who have come seeking his aid. According to Luke, he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." (Acts 10:28) And, a little later afterward, Peter said to the same Gentiles, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34-35) Peter, who had been so sure that only Jews could be admitted to the company of Jesus, who had insisted that Gentiles convert to the whole of Judaism before being baptized into the church, became the one who said his fellow Jewish Christians, "Can anyone withhold the water

for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47)

I suggested as I began today that there must be something common to Peter and Paul which speaks to our faith, some message which their witness speaks more eloquently together than apart. I believe it is this: that no matter how strongly we hold our opinions and beliefs, we must be prepared for the possibility that God holds a different opinion, especially if the question pertains to church membership. Indeed, the examples of Peter and Paul suggest that the more certain we are about who is in and who is out, the greater the possibility that God disagrees with us, and if are so convinced of our own rectitude that it causes us to exclude anyone from the household of God, God’s disagreement is a virtual certainty. God, as Peter said, shows no partiality, and we should not call anyone profane or unclean.

But no matter what the issues may be, the lesson to draw from the examples of these two great saints is to expect the unexpected from God. Do you remember the old TV show *Candid Camera*? Allen Funt, the originator and host of the show had a famous line he said just at the end of each episode: “Remember, when you least expect it, someone, somewhere, may walk up to you and say, ‘Smile! You're on Candid Camera.’” The lesson to take from Peter and Paul is that God is like that: When you least

expect it, sometime, somewhere, God may walk up to you say, “Smile! I’ve got a different plan for you.”

It is not reasoned argument, logical debate, adherence to the Law, or acceptance of some propositional maxims, that makes us Christians and children of God. It is vision, and vocation, and conversion, and grace. That is what made Paul and Peter who they were, and made it possible for them to do what they did, and that is why we venerate them as the two pillars of the church of which Jesus Christ is the foundation. May we, as we prayed in our opening collect*, be instructed by their example and ever stand firm upon that foundation.

Amen.

**Collect for Sts. Peter & Paul, The Book of Common Prayer – 1979, p. 241: Almighty God, whose blessed apostles Peter and Paul glorified you by their martyrdom: Grant that your Church, instructed by their teaching and example, and knit together in unity by your Spirit, may ever stand firm upon the one foundation, which is Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*