

Earlier this week, I tried to sneak in a run before an evening appointment, and had a good laugh when I looked at the training status on my sports watch. In bold letters, it said “Overreaching.” When I first saw it, I literally began arguing with my watch, saying that I wasn’t overreaching. Then I paused for a moment, and I realized that this was a pretty accurate statement for me across the board. Far too often, I find myself overreaching, trying to take on more than I should by my own.

As odd as it might sound, this helped me reach an insight about today’s readings which prepare us for next week’s Solemnity of the Ascension. In our Gospel, Jesus tells us that He must go so that He can send the Holy Spirit upon us. He then says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. You heard me tell you, ‘I am going away and I will come back to you.’” This mystery is deepened by Jesus’ words to Mary Magdalene after His Resurrection. He told her, “Mary! Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father.”

I must admit that I have always struggled to truly understand these words. Why should we not want to cling to Jesus? Why did Jesus have to leave so that He could send the Holy Spirit upon us? It doesn’t seem to make sense to me, and yet the fact that Jesus said this means that there is a truth here which I am failing to fully understand. As I pondered this mystery, it struck me that perhaps one of the reasons that Jesus needed to leave is so that the Church could actually be fully formed.

I know that this sounds strange, but hear me out. While Jesus was on this earth, the disciples formed a community around Him but they were rarely if ever in full communion with each other. The Scriptures tell us that they were constantly bickering among each other, arguing about who was greatest. They were pointing out each other’s faults and ignoring their own. They were running away and disappearing when things got difficult. While their relationship with Jesus might have been strong, their relationships with each other were sometimes quite weak.

All of that changed when Jesus ascended to Heaven. They could no longer cling to Jesus, so they had to start clinging to each other. They could no longer wait for Jesus to tell them the answer, so they had to start calling upon the Holy Spirit and discern God's will together. We see that played out in a very particular way in today's first reading. The early Church experienced a deep crisis when Gentiles began converting and seeking baptism. Some factions in the Church argued that those who wanted to become Christians had to follow all of the Jewish laws and customs. Others argued that converts were not bound by all of the Jewish laws. This caused great dissension and debate, so the Apostles and other distinguished leaders of the Church gathered in Jerusalem to discuss this matter.

At this first Ecumenical Council, they debated and discerned with the guidance of the Holy Spirit until they eventually came to a resolution that changed the trajectory of the Church forever. "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us to not place on you any burden beyond these necessities..." The most profound aspect of this is not even what they decided, but the fact that they recognized that the Holy Spirit was speaking through them when they gathered together in prayer and spoke with one voice. They were no longer crippled by the absence of Jesus because they realized that Jesus was still there with them, manifesting His will to them through the Holy Spirit.

As I say this, I am reminded of a visit to some ancient ruins in Paestum, Italy. There for the first time ever, I saw the ruins of an ekklesiasterion. This was a set of descending circular benches ringed around a central floor where a public speaker could address an assembly of the people. When I saw this building, I finally understood why early Christians decided to call themselves an ekklesia, a Church. As a Church, we are called to be a single unified body of people, united around Christ our Head, listening to His words and discerning what they mean for our lives.

As a community, we must be equally united around Christ and each other. If we are not united with Christ, we cannot truly be united to each other. And if we are not truly united to each other, then we cannot be truly united with Christ. One cannot exist without the other. As we have heard Jesus say again and again, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” While it is true that salvation comes in and through our faith in Jesus Christ, that salvation is worked out in fear and trembling within the community.

So what implications can we draw from this for ourselves and our community? I think it is first important to recognize that we cannot face our problems alone. Christ formed a community so that we can learn how to love Him in loving one another... so that we can support each other in all of our joys and struggles. When we do this together, an amazing thing happens. God becomes present in our midst in a way that does not happen when we are alone. As is said elsewhere in Scripture, “where two or more are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.” The Holy Spirit comes to us when we gather in Christ’ name and we are empowered by His presence, better able to discern the will of God for our lives.

As smart as our phones and watches might be, we can’t always count on them to tell us when we are overreaching and trying to handle our problems and struggles on our own. We can, however, rely on our faith community to do this if we stay plugged in with them. Today, we are challenged to reach out to one another and face the struggles in our lives as a united faith community. When we do this, we will be filled with peace as the Holy Spirit manifests itself in our midst and reveals to us the path to salvation.