Today we get to have a little Bible Study on the Acts of the Apostles.  It is really simple.  Remember the odd numbers chapters 5, 7, and 9 like the nine innings in a baseball game.  In the bottom of the fifth inning or the end of chapter 5, we meet Gamaliel, a Pharisee and teacher of the Law who is a member of the Sanhedrin.  In the top of the seventh inning or beginning of chapter seven we meet the Deacon Stephen who professes Jesus the Nazarean as the Messiah.   Then at the bottom of the seventh or end of the chapter, Stephen is stoned to death at the behest of Saul.  We wait till the ninth inning or the ninth chapter to learn more about this Saul who sets out to find more followers of Jesus to kill.  Suddenly, Jesus appears to Saul and Saul undergoes a conversion.

If we remember these three chapters, five, seven and nine and the characters Gamaliel, Stephen and Saul, we can bring alive today’s Gospel.  When Jesus talks about remaining in him, listening to his word and giving glory to the Father, Gamaliel, Stephen and Saul show us what to do and what not to do.  You see the contrast is between Gamaliel and Saul.  Gamaliel and Saul are both pharisees although Gamaliel is older, and Saul is identified as the young man.  In chapter five of Acts we learn the so-called Gamaliel principle.  It is worth noting it as a tried-and-true means of knowing God’s will.  According to Gamaliel, not a follower of Jesus himself but a devout learned Israelite, God’s will can be tested and discovered.  He says in verses 34-40: “If the work of these followers of Jesus comes from God, it cannot be destroyed.  If it is of human origin, it will destroy itself.”  Hence, Gamaliel hesitated to condemn the followers of Jesus.  He called for the release of those taken prisoner.

On the other hand, Saul condemns Stephen the Deacon and gains popularity for stirring up the crowd that stoned Stephen.  This is the story of the seventh chapter of Acts.  We must read onward to chapter nine to see Saul’s conversion.  Jesus appears to Saul to condemn him for persecuting his followers and blinds Saul.  Only then does Saul respond to the voice of Jesus and believe in him as God’s messiah.

Gamaliel understood better than his younger colleague that God controlled the growth of faith.  Time would show if this Jesus of Nazareth were a true prophet or not.  Saul, on the other hand, presumed to know God’s will immediately.  He would not wait to see if the followers of Jesus amounted to something or disappeared as had other so-called prophets and messiahs.

We too are called to be patient and still and let events unfold.  It may be useful to remember that we are only branches on the vine and not the root.  This is today’s message from the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus is the vine and of course the root.  We stand on his shoulders looking down at him.  Saul considered himself the vine and looked only to Almighty God, the Father, for guidance.  It did not occur to him to listen to the words preached by this Jesus of Nazareth who claimed to be God’s son, his chosen one.  Had Saul listened to Jesus, he would have come to the same conclusion as the apostles or Stephen.

Have we ever judged events or people too quickly?  Let me introduce you to the Chief Racing Steward of Kentucky who heroically disqualified Maximum Security the winner in the 145 Kentucky Derby on May 5, 2019.  Maximum Security’s abrupt swerve at the top of the stretch plainly impeded several of the horses chasing him and, arguably, imperiled both horses and riders.

“They had to take him down,” trainer Mark Casse said on the morning after Derby 145. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s the Kentucky Derby or not. He put horses’ lives in danger. He put people’s lives, jockeys’ lives, in danger.”

452 later the final appeals to courts were concluded and the race owner’s lost each time and finally accepted the outcome.  For the Chief Racing Steward it was vindication for a decision she knew would not be well accepted.  Nevertheless, she disqualified Maximum Security and faced her critics leaving Churchill Downs under armed security to the parking lot.

The same could be said for the General Managers of NFL Football Teams who draft new players.  The easiest method to draft is to take the hottest player available when the team is on the clock.  Fans will be pleased because a talented athlete can always find a spot on the team.  The alternative is to draft to fill the current need of the team.   This might be to find an offensive tackle to protect the 36 million dollar quarterback signed a year ago.  Fans may not like the choice of a tackle, but he may be the missing piece in a winning football team.

I could give other stories about jumping to conclusions and not giving people a chance.  We have seen how this too is part of our faith life.  Our responsibility as branches of the vine is not to presume to do God’s will.  Jesus, the Son of God, through the Holy Spirit, reveals the will of God.  Our job is to stay close to Jesus in the Holy Spirit.  Like the non-believer, Gamaliel said, “If the work of these followers of Jesus comes from God, it cannot be destroyed.”  Saul learned this the hard way when Jesus appeared to him leaving poor Saul blind.  It was actually for his own good.  He turned away from sin and accepted Jesus as Lord.  His sight returned and he became an apostle himself.