

## Seventh Sunday of Easter: May 21, 2023

Acts 1:6-14

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

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In the context of our church calendar, we stand at yet another time of preparation. Churches across the West celebrated the Feast of the Ascension last Thursday. Ascension Day is 40 days post Easter, and ten days prior to Pentecost. This is a liminal space that is characterized by absence. Once again, the disciples find themselves in uncharted water. And so they returned to the upper room – but this time, it was not for fear or hiding. Instead, Luke tells us, they devoted themselves to prayer as they awaited the promised gift of the Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the ascension is the foundation of all that comes after it. Whereas in Luke's gospel, the Ascension signals the completion of Christ's ministry, in Acts, Luke imagines it as the seed of God's reign that would, with the power of the Holy Spirit and the fertile soil of souls tilled in prayer, blossom into the proclamation of the gospel to the nations. The rest of the Acts of the Apostles will trace the movement of this Spirit through the people of the Way as they are empowered to carry on the mission of God.

Jesus' ascension is the *hinge* of Luke's two-volume narrative. It provides a transition between Jesus' earthly presence and ministry, and the work of the apostles as they preach the good news. More than that, it is the hinge that provides continuity between the mission of God embodied in Jesus Christ and the ministry for which the Spirit will come upon the disciples and empower them to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Jesus' story, begun in the gospel, does not conclude with his ascension. It is continued in the lives of those who were promised the empowerment of the Spirit and sent to tell the world about Jesus.

But Pentecost is still a week away. And our liturgical "location" invites us to embrace, once again, the liminal space between now and not yet, between promise and fulfillment, between hope and transformation. I suspect this is a space that many of us are familiar with right now. We continue to navigate the transition to a new rector. We continue to navigate the fallout from a global pandemic. We continue to navigate a political landscape that seems irreparably broken and divided. But it is precisely in this space that we prepare to receive something new – not through strategic planning and organizing; that time will come. Right now, though, that preparation happens through prayerful waiting and discernment.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus was also preparing his disciples for the experience of liminal space and time, which would be caused by his excruciating absence. That time would be fraught with confusion and fear, betrayal and abandonment. Jesus knows that his absence will make it harder for the disciples to live as one, to be in communion with one another in loving service and mutuality. Just before he prayed for his disciples, he bid them to abide in him and promised that he would abide in them. The unity for which Jesus prays is founded in this notion of abiding, which Jesus explains elsewhere as the result of the Spirit's empowering presence and her guiding us into all truth, reminding us of all that Jesus said and did and commanded.

In the Amish church, Ascension Day is observed as a solemn day of lament.[1] It is a day on which the faithful gather and lament Jesus' absence in the world. I can relate to such an interpretation

of the Ascension. It doesn't take a prolonged look to see all of the ways that *disunity* flood our social structures and relationships, our political institutions, and our churches. It seems that whatever is meant by *unity*, by oneness and by being "in" one another, is an ability that lies outside of human possibility. What hope have we of transformation, of being so united with one another in Christ that we become one body? When we look at the world through this lens, we become deeply aware of Jesus' absence.

But I wonder if this isn't part of the word that John has to speak to us this morning. Perhaps the prayer that John attributes to Jesus is as instructional as it is intercessory. The basis for oneness, for unity, is not founded on human capability to impose conformity, nor is it an erasure of difference. Unity is produced not by effort but through mutual indwelling, through the Spirit of God drawing us into union with God in Christ, and in so doing, drawing each of us into communion with one another.

On the one hand, I find it a relief to know that the source of our unity is Jesus Christ, rather than our own efforts to establish peace and harmony between all the peoples of the world. That weight does not rest on my shoulders, on your shoulders, or even on our shoulders! On the other hand, God calls us to cooperate and participate in the work of liberation and redemption, of restoration and reconciliation.

My "oneness" with Jesus means that I cannot ignore the things in this world that disrupt, degrade, and destroy life. My "oneness" with every human being – past, present, and future – demands that I stand in solidarity with those whose dignity and worth are constantly destroyed, whose bodies bear the weight of discrimination and violence. If God is in me and I am in God, I must stand as a tangible sign of God's divine NO to all that is death-dealing in our world. And, if God is in me and I am in God, then I must also stand as a tangible sign of God's divine YES to all that is life-giving.

In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., reminds us that "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." Our unity, our oneness, is already a reality. We don't need to build it, we simply need to embody it.

In this time of preparation, as we await the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost, let us turn to God in prayer. Let us lament the ways in which Jesus' absence is felt in the world. And, let us also look to God in prayer in anticipation of what the Spirit is working in our midst. Today, on this last Sunday in Easter, let us pray for a fresh outpouring of God's Spirit on our world, in our lives, and in this our parish home. Amen.

References:

[1] Isaac S. Villegas, "Living Word: May 10, Ascension of the Lord," in *The Christian Century*. April 10, 2018.