

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2008

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*Scriptures: Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68; 1Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11*

This past Thursday was a day in the church year that we tend to ignore. I don't know if it has always been this way, but Thursday was Ascension Day, the day ten days before Pentecost when we tell the story of how Jesus was taken up into heaven, to be seated at the right hand of the Father, awaiting the day he would come again in glory. We have one account of that event in the reading from Acts this morning.

Whatever the details, Ascension reminds us that the day came when the followers of Jesus had to go on without him. That was probably a good thing, since in his presence it seems like they kept being distracted by thought of conventional earthly kingdoms. Was he going to restore the kingdom of Israel now???? The day came when Jesus had to leave. He had to depart so that the Holy Spirit could enter their hearts. He had to leave so that they could finally get it, so they could understand that they were the ones who were being sent out to proclaim, with their words and with their very lives, his message of God's grace, forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation.

So, on that day, ten days before Pentecost which we will celebrate next week, Jesus ascended. And the disciples were left with a simple promise, the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit. With that the disciples went back to Jerusalem. There they prayed, probably praised, and generally stayed in the upper room, waiting to see what would happen next.

A lot of the Christian world is still living as if we were still in those 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost. A lot of Christians live lives that look a lot like that little band of followers up in that room. It looks good, a close-knit community. It usually feels pretty good too, unless people start bickering over what prayers to pray and what kind of praises to sing. Church communities can go on a long, long time like that. Lots of churches do.

But the simple fact of the matter is that we don't live in those 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost. We live in a post-Pentecost world. We have received the Holy Spirit. Our lives are changed, whether we realize it or not, whether we live it out or not. We have been claimed. We belong to God. As brothers and sisters in Christ we belong to each other.

The theme of community has been running pretty strongly through many of the Easter texts these past 5 or 6 weeks, so I'm not going to go there again, except to say it is a pretty radical thing to be united to people from all walks of life, from every nation of the world. At the Synod Assembly we celebrated our connection to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone. We celebrated our connection to Lutheran Christians from Monroe, LA to Clovis, NM, and lots of places in between. And that by itself is pretty radical. One shakes one's head sometimes to think, "In Christ I am united to them?" Yep! Yes, we are. So unlike the divisive world around us we are not at liberty to "blow off" people we disagree with, or can't relate to, or who just plain, "get on our nerves." Because we are all born anew by water and Spirit, we are made one in Christ Jesus. And the Spirit will give us the eyes of faith to see, not an enemy or adversary, not a nuisance or a burden, but a brother, a sister, a redeemed child of God, fellow servant in God's Kingdom, a co-worker, a friend.

Now, besides this being united by the power of the Holy Spirit, there is one other thing to remember about living in this post-Pentecost age of ours. And that is, that we are sent. We are a people with a mission, to share God's love and God's ways with a hurting world.

When I read the first lesson for today, I got such a vivid mental image of disciples standing around, looking up into the sky after Jesus ascended. The author of Acts doesn't give a lot of details. You just get the impression that one moment Jesus was there, explaining how they should carry his message to the ends of the earth, and the next he was gone, "taken up into the clouds." I get this image of the disciples looking up, then looking around at each other, each thinking to himself, but a little afraid to say, "Did you just see what I just saw?" And then, they all look up again, as if to say, "Wait! Come back! Don't leave us! What do we do now?" The answer, of course, was, "Don't just stand there. Go."

And to their credit, the disciples did go. Eventually. After Pentecost they did go, to the ends of the earth, to Africa, to Asia, to Europe. To Jews, to Gentiles. To slaves, to free, to rich, to poor. They proclaimed Christ crucified and risen. And they lived the way that Jesus taught them to live. They cared for the poor, the lame, the sick. They broke bread together. They welcomed the stranger, the outcast. Most notably they broke down society's barriers. Their community of acceptance and care undermined the power of the society's codes about who was in and who was out, who had power and who had none. Needless to say, that upset the powerful ones. That's what eventually brought about the suffering and abuse that St. Peter was talking about in the letter we read from today. We don't know if the Christians Peter was addressing were being persecuted or not, but in some places it did get that bad. Christians were thrown in jail, or thrown to the lions, just because they actually dared to live out Jesus' radical message of love, forgiveness, compassion, equality, and respect.

We need to consider the possibility, though, that Peter's message about being prepared for an "ordeal", about suffering and being reviled, is not just a message for folks a long time ago and far away. Those who live out Jesus' message of God's kingdom to the fullest will still find themselves in conflict with the kingdoms of this earth, of today's world. There are still a few churches out there who get into trouble with today's powers for living out Jesus' command about loving God, loving your neighbor, even loving your enemy.

There are still a few churches, a few pastors who come under attack for speaking truth to power, for being the prophet in our day who is bold enough to say to corrupt, self-serving, egotistical leaders, "Thus says the Lord..." There are still those Christians who get out of their comfort zones, who take risks, whose faith takes them on journeys to faraway places to walk with and talk with people they have never met. There are still Christians who break down the barriers, who reach across the lines society draws in order to welcome the outcast, to provide for the foreign sojourner in our midst (and that one can get you in a lot of trouble these days.)

There are still Christians who answer the call to care for the sick, to help the poor, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked. That doesn't garner too much criticism, unless, of course, you are trying to feed them in a neighborhood that some developer is trying to develop, unless someone is bothered by the presence of folks not like them.

You and I both know that there are still plenty of Christians that just want to be nice, good Christians who don't offend anyone. They try to be nice, they pray for their families and friends. They are so happy to be loved by God, but it doesn't ever get much further than that. Which reminds me of nothing so much as those disciples, standing around, staring off into heaven. It's not that it's wrong, exactly. But it's not the place to stay. It is only the place to begin.

From there we are sent to the ends of the earth, to live out our faith. We are sent to live out our faith in ways that make a difference, in ways that create God's kingdom, moment by moment, here on earth now. And, if we are really doing that, chances are good that it will offend someone. Living out God's kingdom has a tendency to loosen the world's grip on people's hearts and minds. And the world is not going to let go so easily.

So prepare to suffer, if only the criticism of those who don't agree or don't comprehend the generosity and kindness borne of knowing you are absolutely and unconditionally loved and forgiven by an unutterably kind and infinitely generous God, the God revealed in Jesus. Maybe, just maybe, by your patience, kindness, and forbearance those who criticize or condemn will come to see something of that kind, forgiving God in you.

I came across a striking quote last week. It was a quote of Arthur Burns, "a Jewish economist of great influence in Washington during the tenure of several Presidents, was once asked to pray at a gathering of evangelical politicians. Stunning his hosts, he prayed thus: "Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ." And then, most stunning of all: "And Lord, I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ.""(Mark Buchanan, "Singing in the Chains," Christianity Today (February 2008), p. 33)

You see, just because we call ourselves Christians, doesn't mean we have it right all the time. Sometimes we are like the disciples, standing around staring off into heaven. Not sure what happens next. So my prayer is that we come to know Jesus the Christ, more and more deeply. That we come to be filled, more and more completely with the Holy Spirit, and that we come to live out that knowing, more and more powerfully. And may God go with us, to protect and sustain us as we do. Amen.