

Ascension and Unity

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

John 17:1-11

¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. ⁶“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

This Sunday is special for a couple of reasons. The first reason you already know about - it's Mother's Day today - and an excellent opportunity to show our thanks and gratitude for all the mothers, grandmothers, stepmothers, wives and other women who give of themselves all year

long.

But in the Christian church, today is special for another reason. The other special occasion is Ascension Day - the day that the church has traditionally commemorated the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven. Jesus's Ascension is an important part of our Christian faith. When we recite the Apostles Creed, we say "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father". That makes the Ascension one of the bedrock events that define what Christianity is.

There is a illustrative story about the ascension of a preacher to heaven.

A preacher dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him is a guy who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket and jeans. Saint Peter addresses this cool guy, "Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?" The guy replies, "I'm Peter Pilot, retired American Airlines Pilot from Dallas." Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the pilot, "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom."

The pilot goes into Heaven with his robe and staff. Next it's the preacher's turn. He stands erect and booms out, "I preached at Saint Paul's in Copperton." Saint Peter consults his list. He says to the preacher, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom." "Just a minute," says the preacher. "that man was a pilot and he gets a silken robe and golden staff, and I get only cotton and wood. How can this be?" "Up here - - we work by results," says Saint Peter, "while you preached- - people slept; while he flew - - people prayed."

Actually, Ascension Day is May 5th this year, which was last Thursday. Why last Thursday? Well, because May 5th is 40 days after Easter. And in the Scripture passage Linda read from Acts a few minutes ago, Luke wrote: "³*After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*"

Forty is one of those numbers that keeps appearing throughout the Bible. During the flood, it rained on Noah for 40 days and 40 nights. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. And Jesus was among the disciples for 40 days after his resurrection. As I mentioned in my sermon about the temptation of Jesus, in ancient Israel 40 was a number that meant "a whole lot", maybe like we would use the word "gazillion" to mean a whole lot. Regardless of how many days 40 may actually mean, Luke says that Jesus ascended into heaven on the 40th day, which means that this year May 5th is the day.

Before Jesus is taken up into heaven, he gives the disciples a hint about what will happen in just a few days, when he says "⁵*for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*" Of course, Jesus is referring to Pentecost, the birth of the Christian Church, that we will be celebrating next Sunday.

The disciples take this to mean that Jesus is about to restore the Kingdom of Israel on earth, which is what so many people of the time were hoping for. So Jesus, in his final words to the disciples, says *"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

With that, Jesus ascended into Heaven. As Luke writes, the disciples are in Jerusalem. The traditional spot for Jesus's ascension is the Mount of Olives just outside of town.

Carol talked about the Holy Spirit in her sermon last Sunday. In this passage we again hear how the Holy Spirit will provide the power and guidance needed by the disciples. And we set the stage for Pentecost.

I read a poem the other day that reminded me of how the Holy Spirit speaks to us sometimes.

The man whispered, "God, speak to me" and a meadowlark sang.
But, the man did not hear.

So the man yelled, "God, speak to me" and the thunder rolled across the sky.
But, the man did not listen.

The man looked around and said, "God let me see you." and a star shined brightly.
But the man did not see.
And, the man shouted, "God show me a miracle." and, a life was born.
But, the man did not notice.

So, the man cried out in despair, "Touch me God, and let me know you are here." Whereupon,
God reached down and touched the man.
But, the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on.

I hope that we will pay more attention to the Holy spirit when it speaks to us.

When Jesus told the disciple to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, he wasn't only speaking to the disciples, but to you and me as well. Jesus is asking us to be witnesses also. Witnesses in the things we say and do. In our everyday lives. Saint Francis of Assisi said it well: "Proclaim the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words."

Have you had a witness in your life? Someone who modeled the words of the Lord in the things that they said and did? I hope that you have. I know that in my life there have been many witnesses. Appropriately, on this Mother's Day, many of those witnesses in my life have been mothers. My wife, my mother, my stepmother, and my grandmothers. Without their witness of the love and life of Christ, I doubt that I would be in church today, and certainly I wouldn't be standing up in front of you preaching a sermon.

In today's gospel reading from the Gospel of John, we hear more of things Jesus prays for the disciples and for us. The setting for this scripture reading is the night before Jesus is crucified, after the last supper. So in reading this passage, we are in effect backing up 40 days to before Easter.

After the supper, and after Jesus washes the disciples feet, he speaks to the disciples - telling them that he will be leaving them. Then Jesus prays to God - a prayer that is referred to as the High Priestly Prayer. It is called that because Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and because he intercedes for his disciples in the way that the high priest interceded for the people of Israel.

During the prayer, when Jesus prays: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world" he shifts the focus from himself to his disciples. God entrusted the disciples to Jesus's care, and Jesus made God's name known to them. The disciples Jesus speaks of are not outstanding in any way. Time after time in the Gospels, we read about the disciples fumbling to understand what Jesus is telling them. Jesus could complain to God about their obvious mediocrity, but instead he speaks of them respectfully -- as if they are a treasure that God has placed into his hands. Eventually, once they are filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples *will* become worthy witnesses -- and powerful advocates.

Jesus continues: "Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (vv. 7-8). Jesus has received all things from the Father, including these disciples. The disciples accept the fact that everything that the Son possesses has come from the Father. Jesus has given the disciples the words that he received **from the Father, and the disciples have received those words and "have believed that you sent me" (v. 8).** That sets them apart from the chief priests and Pharisees, who rejected Jesus' words. While often clueless, the disciples have nevertheless committed themselves, not only to the words that Jesus gave them, but also to Jesus himself. They stood by him even when it was dangerous to do so, although they will waver when he is arrested and crucified. After they see the risen Christ, they will become the pillars of faith that Jesus intends them to be.

There is a lesson here. You would think that God would give Jesus the best of everything. You would think that he would be raised in a palace and that his disciples would be cultured and competent. Nothing could be further from the truth. The gifts that God gave to Jesus (beginning with his birthplace in a stable) were marginal, at best, when measured the way that the world measures things. Nonetheless, the Father who gave the gifts also blessed them and made them worthy.

We often feel cheated by the circumstances we find ourselves in. But if we will keep our minds and hearts open to God, we will find that God will transform our ordinary circumstances into blessings. Paul says, *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances"* (1 Thess. 5:16-18). We can do this, even in difficult circumstances, because we know the power of

God to transform our Good Fridays into Easters.

Jesus continues his prayer, saying: "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you Holy Father, PROTECT THEM in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

These words suggest how difficult it must have been for Jesus to leave the disciples. He had lived with them and led them for a long time. He had tried to teach them everything that they would need to know, but for the most part they had not understood. After his ascension, Jesus would need them to carry on his work, and there was no indication so far that they would be able to do that.

But what really hit me as I read this prayer was that Jesus loved the disciples and wanted the best for them. He was going to leave them -- and it was difficult for him to do so. And so he prayed, "Holy Father, PROTECT THEM!" Any parent who has said goodbye to a son or a daughter can imagine Jesus's deep feelings for the disciples as he prays for God's protection for them.

Jesus says: "PROTECT THEM in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." and "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. . . " That indicates that Jesus wants us to be one with God and one with each other.

Two thousand years after Jesus prayed this prayer, you have to wonder whether the followers of Jesus are one. Over the years, believers in Jesus have fought and feuded, have split into dozens - if not hundreds - of sects and denominations and separate groups of believers. It is hard to think of Christians as being one with each other.

Garrison Keillor, in his book "Lake Wobegon Days", tells a story about growing up in a small Minnesota town. He writes: "In a town where everyone was either Lutheran or Catholic, we were neither one. We were Sanctified Brethren, a sect so tiny that nobody but God and ourselves knew about it, so when kids asked what I was, I just said Protestant. It was too much to explain, like having six toes. You would rather keep your shoes on."

Christians are divided into at least three large groups -- Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant (with some who wouldn't claim any of the three). Anglicans are not quite Roman Catholic or Protestant but somewhere in between. And Protestants are divided into United Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists of many kinds, Lutherans, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren and Assemblies of God. There are denominations known to many by their initials. UCC, AME and AME Zion, and RCA. And somewhere among them is Garrison Keillor's Sanctified Brethren, a small sect known only to the people who gathered in his aunt and uncle's living room on folding chairs.

Jesus is still praying after all these years, praying "that they may be one." Is the answer then to

get rid of denominations? Some experts in church growth suggest removing denominational names from church signs. "Saint Paul's Church" rather than "Saint Paul's United Methodist Church." Should we be working to merge all the churches into one? Even if that could be accomplished, is that what Jesus was praying for?

Jesus didn't map out a program but it seems clear that his prayer was for oneness, not sameness. Jesus didn't even pray that all believers would agree. And it became clear in Paul's letters that the early communities of believers had many disagreements. Jesus didn't pray that all would merge. It is true that denominations can be seen as signs of human brokenness; but denominations can also be seen as gifts. If we remember then the source of our oneness is not in human creations but in Jesus Christ. As Bishop Bill Lazareth reminds his fellow Lutherans, "Lutheran is an adjective, not a noun!" There are Lutheran Christians and Methodist Christians, Roman Catholic Christians and Baptist Christians. AME Christians and Mennonite Christians. Each group brings a particular perspective to understanding the Gospel and following the way of Jesus.

In the same way, love is a verb not a noun. That is what Christ asked us to do - love one another. We may believe differently, we may worship differently, but we should love each other just the same.

Jesus is still praying after all these years. Praying that some day all Christians will join hands around the same communion table. Praying that our differences will not divide us but will reveal more and more fully the many-colored body of Christ. It can be difficult and scary to open ourselves to Christians whose language and worship styles are different from our own or whose social standards and lifestyle are different.. But maybe it's time to encourage the young boy in Lake Wobegon to take his shoes off -- to tell people he's part of the Sanctified Brethren. If you don't know what that is, well he can tell you, and you can tell him about your church. Who knows? You both might end up with your shoes off, standing on holy ground.

Amen.

Offertory Prayer: We give thee but thine own, Whatever the gift may be.
All that we have is thine alone, A trust, O Lord, from thee. Amen

Benediction: And now may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be amongst you and abide with you, now and evermore. Amen.