

“Understanding Church”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 24, 2009

7th Sunday of Easter – Ascension Sunday

Ephesians 1:15-23

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Acts 1:6-14

“As they were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9) If the resurrection is difficult for many Christians to understand, this scene from the opening chapter of Acts is even harder to imagine. It’s almost as if Jesus, having risen again to appear to the disciples, is now Superman – able to leap tall buildings – and we are expected to believe that, in his final exit from earth, he says a final “up, up and away,” and then is gone.

And yet, every time Christians recite the Apostles’ Creed, we proclaim that he “ascended into heaven, to sit at the right hand of God the Father.” The final departure of Jesus from the earth leaves us, his disciples, in a different place: watching the sky and awaiting his promised return, but not necessarily expecting to see it. According to our faith, Jesus is now where he is supposed to be – in heaven – and we remain here on earth where we are supposed to be, until the time comes for us to join him in that other realm.

The ascension narrative is a story about waiting, about the experience of uncertainty. During the forty days after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples and now asked them to gather together, in anticipation of the time of the great fulfillment, when the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon them. But, Jesus instead tells them: “it is not for you to know the times...the the Father has set.” (Acts 1:7) Then Jesus ascends into the clouds, and they are left to wonder when and where and how?

This had become, for them, the uncertain time of the in-between; not unlike the uncertain periods of in-between that we experience in our lives. When will the soldiers come back from overseas? When will the doctor’s office call with the test results? How long will this recession last? How long until we can fully forgive? For the disciples, we know that the waiting lasted just over a week, about ten days, from the day Jesus was lifted up into the clouds until the moment when Holy Spirit descended upon them at Pentecost. For us and our particular waiting, it might be ten minutes, or ten months, or more. But, whatever the length of time, the waiting is hard, and the disciples who witness the Ascension appear overwhelmed by what they now face.

The “men in white” who appeared as Jesus was ascending asked the disciples: “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11) Perhaps, the messengers were saying to the disciples to stop staring at the clouds and get going to the world. Jesus had taught them to share the good news; had commissioned them to take it to the far corners of the earth, and yet, there

was something they needed to do first. They returned to a place that they knew, a home outside of Jerusalem, and gathered together to pray. This was partly a family affair – with Jesus’ mother Mary and his brothers present – but also a gathering of a larger family of disciples who now share a common purpose and identity. They waited there together as a community: different generations gathered to encourage one another and learn together, to sing and to pray; in other words, they did church.

In Ephesians, Paul writes to encourage the people of a particular church to understand how it is that they are to be in community. Jesus is the head of the church, the body of Christ on earth, “the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Eph. 1:23) If, therefore, the church is the body of Christ in its fullness, then we must take on the roles of the other parts: its hands and feet, its eyes and ears. Gathered together, in communion with one another, God’s plan for salvation takes its shape. While we often think of personal salvation, Paul alludes to it here as a “corporate affair: known through the church as it grows into the fullness of Christ’s body. Christ saves through tangible, committed communities.”¹

Why then, we wonder, do our churches sometimes look and feel so incomplete? What about all the people, even the Christians, who are not here, who seem not to be so committed to this or some other faith community? Why does it feel as if, in some places, the church falls far short of being “fullness of Christ?”

It would be both untrue and absurd to claim that this or any church could offer the full representation of Christ on earth. All too often we, as members of the body, show a half-hearted commitment to the ministries of Jesus. We make decisions then second-guess them; or we delay making any decision because of the chance it might offend; or we spend too much time debating things that are simply distractions. It’s an almost universal reality that churches argue over things like carpet colors, and styles of music, and what the sign in the front yard should say. If these debates have taken place here, you are certainly not alone.

Why is that? How can we better understand church so as to try and avoid becoming distracted by the little things so as to focus on the more important things? Maybe we begin by trying to understand this idea of the ascension as a good thing: an “uplifting” experience. The mere fact that Jesus left the disciples rightfully inspired them to seek a new way of relating to him. And so they gathered to pray. The idea of having a service of worship was not anything new – it was an integral part of the Jewish faith and countless other pagan religions – but the purpose of worship in this emerging Christian community pointed to something different.

After looking up at the clouds for a while, and then being asked by these two mysterious men in white why they were doing so, the disciples decided to worship. By gathering together for prayer, they sought to bring Christ – the head – into their body, the church. Within this act of worship, they found a way to remain in relationship with Jesus who had been present with them

¹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

on earth. And so, they read the scriptures and offered thanksgiving and confessed their sins and sang hymns and celebrated the Lord's Supper to remind them of their relationship with Jesus. As he had been among them during his life, he was now among them again through their service of worship. As they had been gathered together, strengthened in fellowship, supported through mutual love during his life and ministry, so now they recreated his body on earth – even though he had ascended to be with God in heaven.

What we share with Christ, when he is present among us in the communion of the church, is what Barbara Brown Taylor calls “the mystery of our mixed parentage.”² We are children of God through our kinship with Christ and, at the same time, children of Adam and Eve, members of very human and often flawed families and communities. In a sense, we have dual passports: citizens of heaven, because Christ our brother has ascended there; and also citizens of the world, in all of its messiness and fallibility. Therefore any community that we try to create – even if we pattern it after the instructions that Jesus left for us – will be tainted by our sinful leanings toward power and greed and selfishness.

“No matter how hard we try in the church,” Taylor insists, “we will always mess some things up. And no matter how badly we mess some things up in the church, other things will keep turning out right because we are not – thank God – in charge. With the eyes your heart enlightened, you can usually spot the one who is.”³

According to Paul, the church is designed to be a colony of heaven on earth; the divine gene pool from which the world shall be recreated in God's image. Our challenge – and it is a healthy challenge – is to call upon Christ's presence and guidance in the creation of this colony. This is a healthy challenge because it constantly calls into question the ways that we order our lives as members of a Christian community, even though it is not our one and only community.

Therefore, what might be lacking in our families, our towns, our government agencies, our clubs and our cliques can be influenced by what happens within the body of Christ. If we reflect about the way that we operate as a church, then we can affect change in all of our human institutions. When we learn to communicate and be in communion as a church, it can influence the way we grow as members of members within our families and friendships. It can lead us toward the “glorious inheritance,” the “immeasurable greatness,” and the “great power” that Paul describes us as having in Christ who is above all things, and over all things, and in all things.

Open the eyes of my heart Lord, Michael W. Smith sings – borrowing his lyrics from this morning's passage from Ephesians – *open the eyes of my heart, I want to see you.*⁴

The church in all of its forms and in all of its locations is not perfect, not even close. We spend a lot of our time in our churches arguing about things that ultimately do not matter. Too

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “He Who Fills All in All” in *Home By Another Way*

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “He Who Fills All in All” in *Home By Another Way*

⁴ Michael W. Smith “Open the Eyes of My Heart” on *Worship*

often, we let our sinful, human genes dominate the divine heritage that we have through our communion with Christ. Even our relationships with one another, our works of compassion and our acts of worship become contaminated by our fears, our insecurities and our fallibility.

But, the church is still the best way that we can honor God by being in relationship with Christ and in community with one another. It is the fullest expression of our divine heritage. It is, on its best days, the closest approximation of a heavenly colony on earth: gathering together to worship God and departing to love and serve one another in his name. And thankfully, God is in charge – not us – God is in charge of the waiting that seems to us to last way to long and often to have no foreseeable end. God knows that we carry two different passports, and that we have within us two different kinds of genes: human and divine. In the words of First Corinthians, the love that we experience through God is “patient and kind...it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (I Cor. 13:4, 7)

Thanks be that God lifted up Christ to be with him, and “has put all things under his feet, and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Eph. 1:23) May it be so for us. AMEN.