

## New Directions

John 17: 6-21; Acts 1: 1-11, 15-17, 21-26

The past six weeks have been noted on church calendars as Sundays of Easter. Today is the seventh and final Sunday of the season of Eastertide, the season of the resurrection. Next week, we begin the move in a new direction- to the Sundays after Pentecost. Pentecost was a time when the Holy Spirit visibly came to the small band of Jesus' followers that remained after his Ascension into heaven. As Jesus had promised, they received the power of the Holy Spirit to support them as they brought the Good News to all the world. Pentecost was the birth of the church and a time when the message of Jesus would take a new direction- no longer led by Jesus but would be in the hands of the followers Jesus had taught for the past several years.

Our Gospel reading for today occurs prior to Jesus' Ascension and Pentecost. It is a time just before Jesus' Passion Week- his suffering, death and resurrection. The reading comes from the Gospel of John and the entire chapter is a prayer that Jesus lifted to God on behalf of the disciples. Jesus is preparing to leave the disciples and intercedes for them through a prayer to God. As we read the petitions Jesus brings to God, we get a sense of Jesus' deep love and concern for his followers. Listen to some of the phrases- remember Jesus is praying to God for the disciples. "I have made your name known to them"; "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one"; "I protected them in your name"; "I guarded them"; "I have given them your word"; "I ask you to protect them from the evil one"; "Sanctify them in the truth." Jesus was leaving the future of "the church" in their hands. His heartfelt prayer was seeking God's continued presence with them when he was no longer present in person.

It has been suggested that this prayer of Jesus —sometimes called his "high priestly prayer"—is a parallel to the accounts of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Gospel of John does not mention that Last Supper, but at about the same time frame we find Jesus washing the disciple's feet- an account found only in John. As we read the three chapters of John prior to this prayer of Jesus, it is clear Jesus is preparing them for the trials and agony of Holy Week and ultimately

the reality of the time when he would no longer be with them. The disciples had counted on Jesus continued presence- his being close to them, teaching them. Now this new direction will force them to face reality- likely a challenging and difficult time. They will hold the responsibility of continuing Christ's message to the world. Thus, John records Jesus' prayer for the disciples. As we attempt to find messages for our lives in these words from the Gospel of John...it seems an appropriate time to also find ourselves on the receiving end of Christ's prayer and do the necessary soul searching that we may hear and feel those words for ourselves.

Christ's expression of love and concern lifts before God the clear and bitter reality that the disciples (and we) require protection from the surrounding evil. The stakes are high. Jesus expresses his faith in God who will care for the disciples after his departure. Jesus seeks their sanctification or "made holy." They will not be removed from the world but rather remain in it to grow in the truth and grace that God will give. As Christians, we too, live in a hostile world. Our Lord gave us a difficult task- to be in this world but not of it. We live here, we have to go by the rules, and yet while we work here, it is still not our final home. And while it may be a hostile place, we are not alone. Jesus prays for the disciples, and us, saying, "I do not pray that you take them from the world but keep them safe from the evil one." This doesn't mean that we are protected from difficult times, even an earthly death. It does mean that we are safe from being separated from the strong support and love of our God.

In this John 17 passage, Jesus petitions God on behalf of the "community" of the disciples, but also for all the generations beyond them- including ourselves. Jesus' prayer for the disciples is that they do not belong to the world but have a oneness with God just as Jesus did. Jesus prays that the community will experience the true joy of God's promises as it fulfills the special role given by God.

Turning to the Book of Acts, the first few verses indicate the author as Luke. The verses reference the "first book" and Theophilus" followed by "I wrote about all Jesus did and taught...." Luke, in the Gospel of Luke, covered everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning of Jesus' earthly life until his Ascension. Now Luke

provides something of a transition between the teachings of Jesus- in the Gospel of Luke AND the Pentecost birth, life and actions of the early church- in Acts.

In this first chapter of Acts, we find the last words the disciples heard of Jesus teaching. The writer, Luke, places the Ascension within the framework of Pentecost as well as noting the baptism of the Holy Spirit. By referencing Jesus' baptism, the writer connects the earliest beginnings of the church with the life and ministry of Christ.

We find the disciples asking Christ about the future- a time when they expected restoration to Israel. Jesus doesn't answer their question, but he does promise the coming of the Holy Spirit and the power that the disciples will receive as they face a new direction- a new responsibility of being Christ's witnesses far beyond Israel. God's plan of salvation will send them to the very ends of their earth. There will be without a doubt a new direction for the disciples and this time it will be up to them.

The Ascension is described in very simple terms by Luke. While Jesus is talking, he is lifted up as a cloud takes him out of their sight. When they can no longer see him, the disciples continue to stare up to the heavens. Two angelic-like men suddenly join them and ask, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking up toward Heaven?" The question is followed by the statement, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." While Jesus' being "lifted up" clearly belongs as the power of God, we should not miss the reference to and the promise of the Second Coming.

But the presence of the two heavenly beings still stands. It is clear that the disciples are not just to stand there, but to go about the work to which they have been called by Christ. While it is tempting and often interesting to consider the imagery of Christ being taken into heaven as many artists have done, we are also reminded to not stand around contemplating and imagining, but to carry out the witness of the risen and ascended Christ. We, too, are not to stand around looking up into heaven waiting for one of those biblical clouds to appear again, but to be about the work and ministry of Christ. The new direction to which the early Christians are called holds an example for our own ministry. No waiting around

staring into the heavens- but get to the work to which we are called.

I find the final verses of our morning's reading from Acts somehow familiar. When the disciples began to realize it was up to them to continue the work, one of the first things they did was call a business meeting. They needed to elect new leadership to fill the vacancy left by Judas- who betrayed Jesus and subsequently killed himself. The process they used, I find instructive- first of all, they were very clear about the person needing to be someone who had experienced the life and teaching of Jesus- someone who, "was witness with us to his resurrection." The importance of continuity with the previous ministry with Jesus was critical. It was also important to retain the original number of twelve. It is suggested that the number twelve symbolizes the original twelve tribes of Israel and thus has an Old Testament connection.

Along with setting out the criteria of the person needed, the disciples spent time in prayer- trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide their thoughts. They choose two candidates and then cast lots to choose the one. One of the commentators I read noted that the casting lots was possibly a process whereby each person scratched the name of their choice on a rock. The rocks were placed in a basket which was shaken until one rock fell out. Interesting!! At any rate, the new church is prayerfully following the leading of the Holy Spirit into a new direction of ministry and witness.

Thoughts and then questions to consider:

1. Christ's prayer for the disciples is a prayer for us- a) our community does not/cannot belong to the world but must be protected from the evils that prevail. Jesus prays that we are not taken FROM the world but be protected while IN the world. b) Jesus prays that the community- our church- Christ's church- exhibit the same oneness that Christ and God shared- that our actions and words may be those of Christ, c) that God will sanctify this community- that we will live as a people committed to the service of a holy God. That we will exhibit service to God above all. QUESTION: Does our service exhibit or show clear service to God?

2. The message the angels brought to the disciples left on the mountain top following Jesus' Ascension carries with it two thoughts/messages. First of all, why are you standing here looking into the heavens waiting for something to happen? Jesus has called us to be busy bringing his message to all the world. What are we waiting for? Secondly, the promise of Jesus' return in the same manner in which he entered heaven. He will come again. Not much will be accomplished by standing watching the clouds. We need to be busy with the work of the church while confident in the second coming of Christ. QUESTION: Do we have that confidence and sense of purpose?

3. The care with which the vacancy left by Judas was filled needs to be noted. When filling church leadership vacancies- be they Elders, Deacons or a Pastor- we must...first be clear about the qualifications and dedication of those we are seeking. Secondly, the election must be one that is the work of the Spirit...sought earnestly through prayer. QUESTION: Are we often just anxious to fill empty seats or office and fail to be prayerfully patient for the Holy Spirit to work?

An old legend tells us about Jesus' return to heaven after his time on earth. The angels spoke to him about his suffering. "You must have suffered terribly when you were on earth." "Yes, I did," answered Jesus. "And" asked the angels, "do the people know how much you love them and what you did for them?" "Oh, no," said Jesus, "only a few people know." "Well, what have you done to let everyone know about your love?" asked the angels. Jesus answered, "I have asked my disciples to tell others about me, and for those others to tell others; until everyone in the world knows about my love for humankind." "But what if these disciples get tired? Or what if others forget? Or what if they no longer care? Haven't you made any other plans?" asked the puzzled angels. "No," said Jesus. "You see, I am counting on them because the church is my body in the world."

Possibly the biggest question we need to clearly answer- do we truly believe we are the "body of Christ?" Are we comfortable being the "body of Christ?"

We are supported by Christ's prayer to God on our behalf and called to continue the work of sharing the Good News- this call seems especially critical at this point in our church's life. In the midst of the new direction we are currently living, we

cannot and should not stand looking into heaven waiting for new leadership. We are Christ's body in the world, called as were the disciples of Jesus, to prayerfully spread the message of God's love and care wherever and whenever we can. How many souls will NOT hear or experience that precious message if we stand waiting? Christ prayed for his body in the world- his disciples. That is us! We are in this time and this place for a reason. New directions...prodded and supported by the Holy Spirit are a sign of the ongoing work of Christ's church. May we be confident of the Holy Spirit's presence as we continue forward in new directions of ministry. Amen

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