

7th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 5.21.23

Acts 1:6-14

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."⁸ But 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."⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹ They 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."¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

John 17:1-11

After 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,² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.⁵ So 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.⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;⁸ for 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.⁹ I 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.¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.¹¹ 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. (534)

Thursday was Ascension Day. Little known, still less celebrated, Ascension Day comes the 40th day after Easter and it has us remember Jesus, crucified, resurrected, at last taken up by a cloud out of the sight of the disciples.

Which is why it's not much celebrated. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor sums it up well: "This is a day when Jesus left us behind. Who wants to celebrate that?"

On the other hand:

Tobias had to have his wisdom teeth out.

Our oldest son, Jess's and mine, Tobias is in his first year of college in Minnesota. When we Goodmans were all there visiting him in April, he mentioned soreness in his mouth that seemed to be making his whole upper body uncomfortable, like there was an infection.

I am generally slow about seeking medical care. I figure a lot of things will pass on their own. But I was alarmed by an infection that was finding its way in through the mouth. We landed an appointment with a dentist in Northfield the day after he first mentioned it. He'd have to have his wisdom teeth removed.

Then came the questions and the scramble. Should we wait until he was home? Could he wait? How uncomfortable was he? How bad was the infection? Could he make it through final exams in this condition?

Then there was the question of how quickly he could get in to see an oral surgeon here, as opposed to there. Here, in the Berkshires, where there's a chronic shortage of every sort of clinician, from dermatologists to dog groomers.

It wasn't until we—Jess, Jack, and I—got home that Tobias realized he needed it done soon.

I called in and around the Twin Cities and found a clinic that could do the extraction eight days from then. Good timing. Tobias was feeling worse. But it was an hour away from St. Olaf College. Tobias would need to be there by eight am, would need to secure a ride home, and would need someone to stay with him all day as he recovered from general anesthetic. He would need to stock his dorm room with soft foods to feed himself for at least two days, maybe more since there was no saying how long recovery would take: soup, yogurt, somehow scrambled eggs. He would need to wear a short-sleeved t-shirt, to fill out tons of forms, and to pay for it after the fact because they had no way to know how much it would cost for not knowing how impacted the teeth were.

Mind you, this is a kid who once forgot to wear shoes when we were going to the library in town. When he got out of the car and started across the street, and I noticed his bare feet, we had to pile back in to the car to go home. To get shoes. And, while we're at it, socks.

Granted, that was quite a while ago. But not as long ago as you might think.

So,

he did it. He did all of it. I told him I'd come out, help him manage it all. He gave that some thought, a day or two. Then he told me, no, he'd be fine. He has a friend who has a friend with a car, and they could drive him there and back, and then stay with him for the day. He stocked up on soft foods. He even, after a few days, weened himself off the Percocet, which they

gave him in *far too great a number*, and then he brought the leftovers to the campus police. (It's not a good idea to have extra opioids lying around.)

He wouldn't have done any of that if I'd have been there.

Sometimes, when the rock of your foundation is no longer there for you, you figure out how to be that for yourself—you and your friends figure it out, how to be that for the world.

Were the disciples ready?

According to John, this was a pressing concern for Jesus: were they ready? Jesus tended to show equanimity, calm about it all. Jesus according to John was full of what seems equanimity. Even on this night of nights, even on this night of his arrest, when he gathered with friends in an upper room, he was calm, he was even-keeled. Judas had already gone out to do quickly what Jesus knew he was going to do. And now it was just a matter of time, which Jesus also knew. His hour had come.

And of it all he was also incredibly articulate. John's Jesus was striking in his ability to articulate what was going on with him—what and why.

That makes sense, of course. Jesus, according to John, is the *logos* of God, the word of God, and moreover the logic of God, the sense or wisdom of God, the stuff of God at the foundations of existence, the foundations of the created order. The what and why of everything: the *logos*. So that this foundational knowing and understanding might also then be made speech: of course, Jesus could manage this.

Thus, we have this long passage from the gospel, three chapters long of Jesus speaking what was soon to happen and even why. The Farewell Discourse and the High Priestly Prayer: Jesus would first speak to the disciples of God—and of himself as abiding in God just as God was aiding in him, a mutual in-dwelling by which the disciples might also come to abide in God by abiding with Jesus, all of which would be done by their abiding with one another. Jesus would then speak to God of the disciples, these people who'd become now friends of Jesus and beloved children of the Father.

For the last two weeks, we've heard from the Farewell Discourse, Jesus speaking of God to the disciples. This week we hear from the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus speaking of the disciples to God, Jesus praying that the disciples might be ready.

"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. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for 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. I 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.”

Equanimity duly noted: I wonder also if he was a little worried.

John’s community had had it rough. The community that gives rise to the books of John in the Bible—the Gospel of John, the three letters of John, and the Revelation to John: this was a distinct community, distinct from the rest of the burgeoning church. The Johannine community was a gathering of outcasts, people who’d been exiled from their households and villages, their synagogues, because of their each individual’s decision to follow in the Jesus way—this one over here, that one over there.

This was something that just didn’t square with the long-established way of life of the people in 1st century Israel. Granted, the Jesus-people didn’t cause any real trouble. They practiced non-violence, after all: they just gathered in secret to say prayers and sing hymns and share a simple meal. But they did refuse both to worship the emperor’s gods and to worship the emperor as a god, which was fine when regular, ancient-way Jews refused to do so. Nobody expected them to do otherwise. But these people weren’t these ancient-way Jews. These were some novel form of the ancient familiar—

which not only put them at odds with others in their households and villages, but also made the whole of their households and villages vulnerable to any imperial crackdown that might come of it all.

Whatever you did in 1st century Israel, you didn’t do anything that would attract the attention of the empire.

These people, with their novel ways, were beginning to attract the attention of the empire. They had to go.

Which had them find one another, chosen families in today’s parlance. The Johannine community, which gives us the Gospel of John: they’d have been a people who’d evoke such a devoted concern as Jesus shows here, and would have appreciated such devoted concern as they remember here. Their literature has a particular tenderness to it, if also an edge of anger.

This edge of anger has tended to be deployed to inappropriate ends. This literature can be deployed for anti-Semitic purposes. But this is to deploy it toward the wrong target. The community of John shouldn’t have us angry at Jews, but angry on behalf of any who are powerless outcasts of powerful establishments, those powers and principalities that gain and maintain power

by casting out and grinding down any who simply cannot conform or refuse to maintain. Such as these are the ones whom the Gospel of John would have us protective from and even angry at. Likewise, it's such as these whom the John's Jesus would have us concerned for: those who seek to abide in God by abiding peacefully with one another—which appeal of love would eventually, eventually gather in the whole world, yet not by force, simply by choice, this one here, that one there.

It would be a long game—as long as the world is long.

And it would be a challenging game, for its refusing to the use the tools of the world to gather people into its aim and end. The challenge of the Church is ever this: that we not ever accept this challenge of the world to attempt to do work of the Gospel using the tools of the world, which are menace, threat, violence, a reversion to that scapegoat mechanism by which the world has done its business since the beginning. The challenge of the Church is ever thus: to grow the Church by means that are also its ends: love, peace, non-violence, honoring of the other. Truly, the challenge of the Church is ever thus: not to engage in its mission using the world's tools. Audre Lorde explained it best: “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”

Were the disciples ready for this?

The Gospel of John would have us ask this question, and maybe even with a tone of worry.

The Gospel of Luke, whose writer also gives us sequel, the Book of Acts, would have us answer, “Yes. Yes, the disciples were ready for this.” Or at least would have us answer, “Yes, they were ready, given a ten-day period of waiting and prayer.”

Not that they knew it would be ten days. No, for all they knew it could be forever.

And not they knew exactly for what they would be waiting. No, for all they knew was what these two men in white robes who stood suddenly by them then told: “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.”

And as we know, it would be ten days until there was a return much like the departure—a sudden coming down of what would come to be recognized as the Holy Spirit, whose noisy, forceful arrival would have people who once felt foreign to one another be suddenly accessible and intelligible to one another, a real and manifest overcoming of divides, people speaking utterly and immovably different languages from one another now intelligible to one another.

This was the beginning of the Church, which was to be a binding together of people to one another irrespective of language, tribal identity, cultural custom, religious practice, now bound

together for the imperatives to love. This was the beginning of the Church, which was to recognize common ancestry in each and all being beloved of God's making, which was to bear a charge not for conformity to some established norm but for loving welcome to each and every particularity that expresses love.

This arrival, this wondrous change, we celebrate next week.

Which, as for this, we must wonder, if with even of measure of worry, would they be ready?

More to the point, are we ready?

Are we up to this challenging task, a task whose challenge is that it's the simplest thing in the world. To love. Simply to welcome and love.

There's really nothing as challenging as such simple love, such uncomplicated love.

There's really nothing as challenging as laying to rest all complication because truly the world will press upon us complication, our human condition one of seeking complication, insisting upon things becoming complicated.

And there's no condition that courts complication as truly and surely as putting a bunch of people in a room for an unknown period where they are to be made simply to wait.

Which is what the disciples were now to do.

Gather in that now familiar upper room, where so much puzzlement and sorrow and tragedy and shocking hope and naked fear have found cause and played out over these last forty or so days.

And now this. They were to return to that room, and wait.

For how long? No answer.

For what exactly? No clarity.

Just wait, and there will be a return much like this recent departure.

Then you'll know.

You'll know.

Here's Barbara Brown Taylor again: "On the surface, it was not a great moment: eleven abandoned disciples with nothing to show for all their following.

"But in the days and years to come it would become very apparent what had happened to them.

"With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven people consented to become the Church, and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers. The

disciples became apostles, witnesses of the risen Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit, and nothing was ever the same again.”

The hope is, of course, that the ways in which nothing has ever been the same since are an improvement upon the ways that would have been had nothing ever changed. The hope is, of course, that the change the Church has brought and still seeks to bring is an improvement, is indeed a blessing unto a world that exists ever in need of blessing. And the score is mixed on that: has the Church brought blessed change or has the Church been a bane on existence? The score is mixed on that. Like everything, it's complicated. Even the simple charge to the Church to be simple has been complicated in its living out. And I don't mean to cote. Where the Church has failed in its mission, it has failed catastrophically.

Where it has been a blessing is just as crucial to recognize.

It is for this that we pray. It is for this that we wait: clarity on how to love in this moment, clarity on how to manifest love in this place, simple clarity on how to intone love into the larger conversation of God and the world and *logos* in which all finds its beginning and its end, how to witness to the power of love amidst the powers and principalities that have aims other than love. Even speaking of it becomes complicated, courting of evermore clauses.

So, the saying of love can't ever fully be said. At the last, it is also, I'm grateful to say, the domain of silence.

Thanks be to God.