



SUNDAY SERMON

The Plan

The Gospel according to John, chapter 17, verses 1 to 11.

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. 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. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 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."

DATE

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Sun., May 28, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Dr. Kate Heichler

READINGS

Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36
I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

Come, Holy Spirit, and makes these words Your Word to us. Amen.

Thursday was Ascension Day, which celebrates one of the odder events in our faith story – the dramatic departure of the already quite dramatically risen Christ. This final scene in the incarnate life of the Son of God tells us how he gets back to the place he says he was before the world existed: the heavenly precincts, where from now on he will be seated in glory at the right hand of the Father. We often to look at the story with the disciples, gazing up at the soles of Jesus' feet as they recede into the clouds. But what if we saw it from the arriving end?

There's a story about an angel who happens to be sitting right where Jesus pops up. This angel's just meditating, when all of a sudden he gets knocked off his cloud. As he picks himself up, he's surprised to see Jesus standing there. "Oh, it's you," he says. "Yep," says Jesus.

"Nice entrance," says the angel. "You here to stay this time?"

"Oh yeah," says Jesus – "It's the Spirit's turn to do the running around now."

"Did you do what you went there to do?" the angel asks.

"Yep – pretty much. I did what the Father asked of me."

"Well..." says the angel, hesitating... "Pardon my bluntness – but it doesn't look a whole lot different than when you went. People are still taking what belongs to others, hoarding money, killing each other, getting sick... it doesn't look like you've finished. I mean, you healed all the folks you ran into, but that still leaves a lot. And there seem to be plenty who never even heard of you."

"Sure," said Jesus. "I can see that it looks like that. But I finished what I went there to do – I took the consequences of sin for them; I set them free from having to worry that Death is the end for them; I showed them what real love looks like – sacrificing what you want so someone else can grow closer to God..."

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The angel was getting agitated. "I'm sure you did all that," he said. "But not everyone got the message."

"Oh, you're right about that," said Jesus. "But my plan's not finished yet."

"Your plan..." "My plan," said Jesus. He took the angel over to the hole left in the cloud where he popped up, and made it a little bigger.

"Come here," he said. "Look down there. Okay, now you see that land, near the Great Sea (what they call the Mediterranean), on the eastern coast..."

"Yeah..." "Okay, see Jerusalem?"

"With the temple? Yeah." "Okay ... now, near the temple, there's a house, and on the second floor of the house is a great big room with a bunch of people in it."

"I see your disciples, and some other people." "Yep."

"Is that your mom in there?"

"Uh huh – she's a disciple now too. And my brothers. And the 11 apostles, and the women who helped us out on the road. They're all there."

"It doesn't look like they're doing anything."

"Oh, I told them to wait," Jesus said. "Wait for what?" asked the angel.

"You don't think I'm going to send them out to do my work without my power, do you?"

"So how they going to get your power?" the angel asked.

"Spirit's coming," said Jesus. "Next week. Like a hurricane. It's going to be major.

They're going to get all fired up, and spread the good news everywhere.

Change the world. People are going to be hearing about my love, and getting connected to me 2000 years from now. Billions of them."

"And that's your plan?" said the angel. "That's my plan," said Jesus.

Those eleven apostles and assorted men and women, they were God's plan. They may not have felt much like it or looked much like it, ambling back to Jerusalem after saying goodbye to Jesus yet again – but they were. Holed up in that upper room, waiting like Jesus said to – they were God's plan.

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," Jesus said.

and you will be my witnesses in Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

You will receive power, and you will be my witnesses. I wish we could memorize that verse, my friends, because that is the church's mission, right there. To witness to the living reality of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Just what is a witness? We often use the word in its legal sense: Someone who testifies to what they've seen or experienced, often involuntarily. The witnesses God calls us to be are story-tellers excited about what's happening. Jesus invites us to testify to what we've heard and seen about him – first in our own region, among those we know – in the case of those first apostles, Judea. For us, our neighbors, our families, our friends, our co-workers, our social networks. To make Christ known in what we say, how we live, in being vulnerable and offering relationship.

But we can't witness if we are not aware of how we experience God ... God is here, and God is out there, and the more we're aware of experiencing the activity of God, the more stories we have to tell. What is God up to in the areas around us, in your office and kitchen? On your Facebook page or neighborhood? Where do we see blessing? Our Mission Strategy Team, which coordinates outreach ministries here, is developing a summer project for us to do on our own, or in families or small groups: We're thinking of them as "mission walk-about," exploring the neighborhoods around St. Columba's, looking for signs of God-activity. What snags our attention? Where do we see energy? Where do we see abundance? What or who do you want to explore more, go deeper with? We might even make passports for us to carry, stamp our "visas" with the places we visit, and answer these simple "Where did you see ..." questions. This will be one way we take the amazing life of God we experience here and mix it up with the life of God "out there." Because, my friends, as rich as this is, out there is where church is to be lived. Our gathering in buildings is to celebrate the ways we've experienced God in mission and relationship out there; to renew and refresh and recharge, and then get back to church Monday through Saturday. Out there is where God is calling us.

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We have a bunch of titles as Christ –followers.

Believers, as we enter into the life of God through faith.

Children of God, members of God’s household, adopted brothers and sisters with Jesus

Disciples, as we begin to take on the disciplines and practices of our master.

Friends, those who are invited into relationship with the living Christ.

And we have another title, too, as inheritors of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: Apostolos. Apostles. Which is another word for “Witnesses.” The apostles were those who had witnessed the Lord Jesus in his risen life. And they bore witness to what they saw. In fact, they couldn’t shut up about Jesus. Even in the face of death threats and persecution, those early followers of Christ couldn’t stay quiet. They gave their testimony everywhere. Thanks to them, the message has been handed all the way down to us.

Now it’s our turn. If we stay quiet about where we experience God, a whole lot of people who are thirsty for spiritual connection aren’t offered the living water we’ve received. If we live our spiritual lives only in these buildings, the world gets it second hand. It’s not complicated – all we do is participate in what God is doing in our lives and talk about it.

“What in the world is God doing with the saints at St. Columba’s?”

It’s not so hard to give voice to our God connection when we have God’s power. We will celebrate that power of the Spirit big time next Sunday, when the bishop is here and we celebrate five baptisms and maybe 30 confirmations and a whole lot of wonderful worship ...

But we already have the Spirit. God is already working through us. We have been baptized with the Spirit, and God is waiting for us to activate that blessing, as we take up our identity as apostles of Jesus Christ, becoming more aware and more vocal about testifying to the activity of God.

So a few more “days” passed in heaven... a few thousand years here on earth. This angel was still concerned – after all, he was still hearing reports that things were not so rosy in the world. So he went back to talk to Jesus again. “Look, Jesus, I know you conquered sin and death and everything ... but I gotta admit, from what I hear, sin and death are still enjoying a pretty good run down there. Now you got Ebola and famine and terrorism and red state/blue state divides, and these guys so rich and these so poor... How are we doing with that plan, now that you’re back here, sitting at the right hand of the Father?”

And Jesus said to the angel, “Let me show you.” And he took the angel to that special spot where you can get such a good view of earth, he pushed a few clouds aside, and he said, “Okay, now you see that large mass of land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans? “Yep.”

“Right, now we’re looking at the Atlantic coast, up a ways... see that bay..”

“Chesapeake?”

“Yeah, a little over ... Do you see a city with a lot of white buildings?”

“One tall, thin one that looks like it could poke out my eye?”

“Yep; now look a little north and west, there’s a beautiful church surrounded by trees.”

“Near Wisconsin Avenue?”

“That’s the one ... Now, what do you see?” “I see a lot of donuts.”

“Not the donuts ... , look at the big rooms on either side of the donuts – you see all those people sitting there?”

“I do! Lots of little kids in one...lots of people in robes in the other...”

“That’s it,” said Jesus.

“Alright,” said the angel. “I see them. So what about ‘em?”

Jesus nodded. “That’s my plan.”

Amen.