

Message for May 28, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: John 17:1-11 and Acts 1:1-14

In transition

Our biblical passages this morning are all about transition. In John, Jesus has been talking with his disciples about what's coming, about what he and they must go through. This is difficult stuff for them to hear. As we pick up the story, Jesus brings God directly into the picture. He lifts his eyes to heaven and begins to pray: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." In his prayer he appeals to God on behalf of his disciples: "And now I am no longer in the world," he prays, "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." In the midst of a very confusing and upsetting time of transition, Jesus draws the disciples into his ongoing relationship with God. Jesus reminds them that they – as well as he – are and always will be in God's hands. In their presence, within their hearing, Jesus entrusts their as-yet-unknown future to God.

A lot happens between this prayer and where we pick up the story next at the beginning of Acts. Betrayal, torture, pain, death, burial, despair, and then – oh, happy surprise! – the resurrection. Talk about an unexpected outcome! According to Acts, for forty days following his resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples, teaching them and giving them instructions. You can imagine that they assume that this will be the new status quo; that Jesus will just keep hanging out with them in his new altered state. But that is not in the cards. Once again, they have to let go. Once again, they are facing the unknown. Once again they find themselves in a most disconcerting time of transition.

Tory Doerksen, one of the pastors at First Mennonite Church of Denver, made an observation which intrigues me. “Recently, I have also found value in reflecting on the ascension of Jesus,” he said. “Why did Jesus leave at the height of his power?” Why did he, at this particular point, quit the scene and leave everything to his disciples? Hmm... He left, it seems, because it was time for a leadership transition. It was time for the disciples – now called apostles in Acts, those who are “sent” – to take their God relationship to a different level and move out into the world. It was time for them to get directly connected to the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew that in order for this to happen, he had to get physically – though not spiritually – out of the way.

And so the last words are said, the last instructions are given, the last blessings received. And then Jesus is gone. “He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Can you imagine what that must have felt like? The apostles left standing, with arms raised, wanting desperately to hold onto contact, wanting so badly for this not to be true. But it is true. Jesus is gone. Now what do they do?

They wait. This is one of the most difficult parts of transitions, the waiting. Waiting is such a situation involves uncertainty and urgency. Things that don’t go comfortably together. The apostles do have some idea of what their next step should be. Jesus had ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. What that means, however, they aren’t really sure. They do know that they need to stick together. And that they need to pray. That is what they saw Jesus do. He modeled for them a relationship with God that they will need. They have learned that their life as a community rests in and depends upon God’s care. Though surely still full of anxiety and the restlessness that seems to be part and parcel of waiting for

something of crucial importance, of being in limbo, they enter into God's presence, they gather together and devote themselves to prayer.

Our denomination, Mennonite Church USA, is in a time of transition, a time filled with anxiety, restlessness and uncertainty. It's not clear what the future will be. Some folks have left and others are threatening to. Those of us who are staying, are not sure how to handle the differences among us. Decisions have to be made; directions set. How do we proceed? How should we proceed? Where is the Holy Spirit leading us?

This summer at the Mennonite Church Convention in Orlando, Florida, we will be spending some very intentional time thinking about this. Glen Guyton, chief operating officer of Mennonite Church USA, has been very involved in planning for the Future Church Summit, which will be the focus of the work of the delegates at Convention. This has been a stressful experience for him. In fact, it's making him cranky. This was obvious from his blog post on May 18:

“Since the beginning of the planning process for the Future Church Summit,” Glen writes, “there has been a sense of distrust from some of those that are part of this body. The so-called ‘progressives’ might as well be quoting the lyrics of Black Sabbath’s *War Pigs*. To some in that group the image of the institution is of, ‘Generals gathered in their masses, just like witches at black masses. Evil minds that plot destruction, sorcerers of death’s construction.’ Some of the so-called ‘conservatives’ are walking around in fear, questioning the integrity of the process and wondering if this new process is basically going to make Mennonite Church USA too gay and too dark.”

Well, Glen, that's laying it on the line! He doesn't mince words, does he?

“I have to believe those voices are the minority of the voices in this church,” Glen

goes on to say. “If all we have left are political polarizations and bureaucratic rhetoric then we should vote to shut the doors when the delegate assembly convenes in Orlando.”

But surely that’s not the case; surely there is hope if we trust the Holy Spirit to lead us. This is God’s church, after all. Glen invites everyone, encourages everyone, whether on the left or on the right or in the middle, to enter into this transitional time with open hearts and minds.

“Sitting down talking to each other face to face at The Future Church Summit is definitely a more Anabaptist and a more Christian way of dealing with conflict than trading barbs on social media or talking about the ‘other’ when they are not in the room,” he says. “Together we will have an especially important role to play in forging the future of the church.

“Those of us who believe that God has a mission for this church need to live into it and stop seeing giants at every turn like the Canaan scouts. We have to leave the Egypt of our despair and walk into a place of blessing and promise. Yes, that will take work. We may lose people. We may need to change some things. We may need to revitalize some old traditions or create new ones. We may need to do some healing — but that will only happen if we work together and share in the vision of what is possible.

“I do want this process to succeed,” Glen says, “and I believe that the majority of people coming to be a part of it still have hope for the work of Mennonite Church USA and hope in Christ who prayed in his last days: ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become

completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Those are the words of John 17:20-23, continuing the prayer that we read this morning.

As we all know, being in transition is difficult. It can bring out the worst in us, but it can also bring out the best. It can bring out the best if we enter into it trusting that God is with us and will guide us. Waiting on the Lord to act, waiting for a direction to be revealed, is not a passive inactivity. It involves prayer and study of the scriptures. It means listening to the Spirit’s leading and to each other. It means seeking counsel and being open to the unexpected. It means entrusting our future – whether it be short-term or long-term – to God and resting in the promise that in Jesus we are one.

"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority," Jesus told the apostles. "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."

We trust and wait. Amen.