

Transitions Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11

The time between Easter—the day of resurrection—and Pentecost—what we know as the birthday of the Christian church—must have been a difficult time for the disciples. The waiting, the not knowing, the fear that what had happened to Jesus might happen to them as well must have been very hard. Sure, there were appearances by Jesus—to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples locked in the upper room, to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to Peter and John and the others who had gone fishing when they just didn't know what else to do—and ended up having a barbecue on the beach with Jesus. In each of these encounters Jesus gave them hints that he wouldn't be around much longer, and instructions about how to carry on after he was gone. But still, knowing that your friend was dead, but somehow not dead? Not knowing how long he would be hanging around, not knowing how the ministry would go on without him. Just the “not knowing” in general—that's enough to make a person crazy by itself.

And that's how it is with transitions, isn't it? Whether you're between jobs, or you've just graduated and haven't started a job yet; whether you have just retired or are in the process of retiring and don't know what you're going to do with yourself once you don't have to go to work every day, transitions can be tough, can be tricky to get through—testing and challenging you more than any other time in life. And then what happens when the transition is through? It might mean a letdown; a feeling of, what do I do now?

Eventually the disciples came to the end of their time “in between”—the day of ascension, the day when Jesus was taken up into heaven. At least that's how the event is described in Acts—that he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. That would be a strange sight, even for us today. The account from Acts goes on to say that the disciples stood looking as he went up, probably thinking something like, “well, what now?” Things still aren't settled for them; just before Jesus ascended, they asked him one last question: “is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They still don't get it, really, they're still waiting for the king on a white horse to throw out the Romans and bring Israel back to glory. Jesus tells them, once again, that it isn't for them to know when things will happen, God is the one who has that authority, but that they will receive the Holy Spirit and continue the work that they had begun with Jesus, and witness to his life throughout the world.

So this really isn't the end of the in-between time for the disciples, but rather the beginning of a new time period. Soon the Holy Spirit will come upon them, but they don't know when or where this will happen; soon the church will begin to develop and grow, new fellowships will come into being, and

the disciples will need to organize themselves and put into action the lessons that Jesus taught them. But in the meantime, it must feel like a time out of time, in limbo almost. And as they stand there looking into heaven, watching Jesus rise into the clouds, two men chide them: why do you stand there? Jesus will return as he left.” It was a sort of, get on with it, don’t stand around with your mouths hanging open, Jesus will be back but in the mean time you have things to do.

And Jesus did leave them with plenty of material to use as the ministry developed into larger groups and into house churches and so forth. “Go into the world and tell everyone the good news” he said. “Teach them how to be disciples and baptize them into the faith.” Feed my sheep, tend my lambs. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned and the lonely, bring water to the thirsty—the water of life. Everything they had seen Jesus do they were to do, everything he had shown them they were to take into the world and share.

And at the end of his life, on the night of his arrest, he gave them one last lesson, the lesson we remember on Maundy Thursday: to love one another, to show the world that they were disciples of Jesus by the way they loved one another. He eats one last meal with them, he washes their feet, and he teaches them about the coming of the Advocate, the Spirit of God, who will come to them after he is gone. “I will not leave you orphaned” he tells them. All this we have seen over the past weeks in our readings from the book of John; and in today’s reading we have one last gift from Jesus to the disciples. He prays for them.

He prays that those who belong to him have eternal life—defined as knowing God and Jesus Christ. Knowing, as in being in relationship with. Not just having knowledge of, intellectually, but knowing the way they knew each other, could spend time in each other’s company, the way you and I know each other. Jesus said he made the Father’s name known to his followers—and to me this hearkens back to when Moses asked God for God’s name. To know someone’s name, to call them by their given name is a personal thing; we may not realize it so much today because our society has become so informal and calling people by their first name is pretty much the way things are done. But it hasn’t been too long ago that husbands and wives didn’t call each other by their given name in public; that children didn’t call adults by their first name, that no one called anyone by their first name without being properly introduced and given permission to do so. By giving the disciples the name of God, Jesus is establishing a special relationship between those who know and love Jesus, and God the Father. He then asks God to protect them so that all who belong to Jesus have this special

relationship with God the Father—the same relationship that Jesus has with God the Father—that all may be children of God.

It is with this memory in mind, as well as the memory of the events leading up to the crucifixion and the memory of what has occurred since then, including the resurrection and the sightings of the risen Christ among them, that the disciples stand watching Jesus go into heaven. Do they understand the significance of what is happening? Or do they feel abandoned? Do they feel lost and alone, unprepared for what is to come? Is this what they expected? I would say not; I would say that this was a turn of events that they never expected. But they are awakened from their surprised state by the men in white who kind of say, he'll be back—now get on with things!

And so they do. They don't know what's coming next, so they do the only thing they know to do, the thing Jesus taught them about transition times: they went home and devoted themselves to prayer, waiting and praying for God to reveal to them what would be next.

As I spoke about earlier, we all go through times of transition, times in-between, times in which we feel that we're wandering in the wilderness even. But we have the example of the disciples and what they did while they waited for what was to come next—they devoted themselves to prayer. We often call using prayer during times of change "discernment", because we're waiting for and seeking to discern wisdom from God our Father, with whom we have the same relationship that the disciples did because we too belong to Christ.

We at COF are in a time of transition, a time of change that many churches are facing. We're getting older, our numbers are fewer, and we can't do all of the things we used to do as a church. It can be worrisome but if we trust in the words of Jesus Christ and we follow his model for ministry, if we follow the example of the disciples as they shifted from followers to leaders, we too know what we must do: We must devote ourselves to prayer; we must seek the guidance of the God of Jesus Christ and the Spirit; we must know that Christ is with us even though we can't see him. Above all, we must continue to the best of our ability to preach, teach, heal, feed, visit, as Jesus did and as he taught the disciples to do. We must continue to grow in our own faith and help others to grow in theirs as well. We must be faithful followers of the way of Christ—not just believing but acting on that belief to bring the light of Christ to our community and to the world. Amen.