

## **Eternal Life and Being One**

Dale Ramerman; 7 Easter, Yr A: Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36;  
Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14:12; John 17:1-11

### **In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.**

The most important celebration of the church year, the day of the Resurrection of our Lord, has passed. We await the celebration of the founding of the church on the Feast of Pentecost. During the seven weeks between these two great celebrations we have read from the Gospel of John, and Jesus' discussion with his disciples before he leaves Jerusalem, crosses the Kidron Valley with his disciples, and enters the Garden of Gethsemane where he was arrested.

This past Thursday was the Feast Day of the Ascension which is always on a Thursday 40 days after Easter. While we do not celebrate the Ascension today (it is not a movable feast), our reading from Acts includes Luke's account of the Ascension.

The Ascension may trouble us a bit — at least it always has me: the image in Medieval paintings of Jesus disappearing into the clouds, while we stare at the soles of his feet. In the church of my youth we acknowledged Christmas and celebrated Easter, but definitely not the Ascension or any other feast day. The first time I recall thinking about the Ascension was on April 16, 1961. Knowing I have a very fallible memory, you might wonder why I recall this detail. It was the Sunday after Yuri Gagarin became the first human to circle the earth in space, and I was home from college for the weekend. Pastor Brown came rushing into the Sunday morning youth group, assuring us as he entered that we need not be upset by this seemingly amazing feat by the evil communist empire; Jesus did it first when he ascended up to heaven. I immediately envisioned Jesus with a jet pack on his back.

A literal notion of ascending up to heaven conflicts with our understanding of the earth as round and of there being no up or down in space. Voyager 1 has been traveling at the rate of about 40,000 miles per hour for 37 years, and is about to leave our solar system. No heaven found "up there" yet.

The Ascension, however, is not about up or down or heaven as a place, but rather about the fact that Jesus' physical presence, after the resurrection, was finite. Fairly soon after the resurrection, he was no longer with his followers.

But while absent, Jesus continued, in an important way, to be with them. How this is possible has been the subject of the readings in the seven Sundays of the Easter season, and in particular, in the Pentecost readings next Sunday.

In our reading from Book of Acts, Jesus dismisses his followers' questions about when God's kingdom will be established on earth — "it isn't for you to know the times or

the seasons"— a response seemingly ignored by vocal, contemporary self-appointed prophets of the so-called end times. Rather than tell when, Jesus tells his followers to be ready to be empowered to do something really big: to proclaim Jesus and his teachings to the ends of the earth. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.

Evangelism! Just the assignment we wanted. But more about Jesus' marching orders next Sunday on the Feast of Pentecost.

In our gospel reading from John, we hear another part of the discourse given by Jesus to his followers. But in today's passage, the followers kind of fade away and what we really hear is an intimate discourse between God and Jesus. I want to talk briefly about three questions our reading may raise for us.

Jesus says in verse 9 that he is praying only for his followers and not for all humankind. That comment troubles me. Why would Jesus not pray for all persons?

The Gospel of John was written 40 to 60 years after Christ's death, during a time, after the destruction of the Temple, when non-conforming Jews, such as followers of Jesus, were being excommunicated from synagogues as heretics. John's community was feeling isolated, alienated, surrounded by hostile Romans and hostile Jews. Jesus' prayer for them, as portrayed in today's gospel reading, was no doubt very reassuring. When we feel besieged, we want to draw lines, with everyone on the outside except those who agree with us.

In Reading the Gospel of John, we would do well to remember this context in which John wrote, and to read the exclusionary language of John with grace-filled hearts, keeping in mind the much more inclusionary language found throughout the gospels, the epistles and the Hebrew scriptures. In our reading from Acts, for example, the disciples are commanded to go to the ends of the earth to proclaim the good news. Indeed, later in John chapter 17, Jesus prays that through his followers, the world will come to believe that God sent Jesus and that God loves them.

The lesson here is that focusing on an isolated verse out of context is a dangerous way to read scripture. Eric in his homily two weeks ago made this point with reference to John 3:16.

The second point I want to raise is found in verses 20 and 21 of our gospel reading. Jesus prays about his followers that "that they will be one just as we are one". Jesus uses his relationship with the one he called "Father" as the standard which Christians should emulate in their dealings with other followers of Christ. Such a measure should also give us pause. We are comfortable being told we should be one with God, but extend that sort of closeness to all followers of Christ? Here we have fallen more than a bit short.

When it comes to the church, disunity has been the rule. Within a few years of Christ's death there were dozens of radically different interpretations of Christ's significance. Christ was a man who only appeared to be God; Christ was God who only appeared to be man. The God of the OT was the same God as portrayed in the NT; the God of the NT was a different God than the evil God of the OT. And so on. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century there were so many competing variations of Christianity, the Roman emperor stepped in and organized a council of the church to sort it out. This council resulted in the Nicene Creed, much of which makes no sense to us today, but which we affirm as a way of identifying which part of the complicated history of the early church we claim as our heritage.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> century we had a Western church headquartered in Rome and a Eastern Church in Constantinople, which formally separated in the 11<sup>th</sup> century over a cause added by the Western church to the Nicene Creed. Since the Reformation, another huge break in the Western church, we have had denomination upon denomination, break-away churches, lawsuits in civil courts over property, seemingly intractable disputes about who is qualified for ordination, disputes about using or not using real wine for communion, and on and on.

Part of the difficulty between Christian groups has been the intense focus on orthodoxy. "Orthodoxy" means right belief. John's gospel does not talk about correct belief; rather it says that eternal life is to know God and God's son. Knowing God intimately suggests to me right behavior, not right belief. We seem to think that if we do not have identical, correct beliefs, we cannot work or pray together.

A second difficulty with Christian unity is that unity is too often thought of as requiring uniformity as part of the same hierarchical structure.

Perhaps a completely different metaphor would work better. Theologian Linda Lee Clader suggests that some ancient theologians who commented on the verses in John about Jesus praying for all Christians to be one, wrote about Jesus' oneness with the Father as an interweaving, a sort of coordinated movement or dancing. What if we applied that image to our relationships with other Christian groups?

While we have differences in liturgy, theology, and church structure, we are all participating together in the same dance of faith as we deal with each other and the world around us, and work for the Kingdom of God.

There is a lot of that sort of interweaving or dancing together at the individual and congregational level. Think about our Komo Kulshan Cluster in the Skagit Valley, the homeless shelter and the labyrinth projects in Anacortes, and the Resurrecion Day camp in Mount Vernon: people and communities of faith dancing together to do the work of the Kingdom of God in very tangible ways as we are supported by Jesus' promise that he will pray for us.

Finally, I want to comment on Jesus's reference in verse 3 to eternal life. We may usually think of eternal life as something that will arrive in the future, the life after death. But Jesus, speaking through John, suggests we may have eternal life now, in this life. Jesus prays "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Think of that. If we know God through Jesus we already have eternal life.

Or, to say it another way, if we engage in the dance of faith with other followers of Christ, working together to ready the world for the Kingdom of God, we are already experiencing eternal life.

Amen

Christ Episcopal Church, Anacortes  
June 1, 2014