

May 16, 2010

Sermon by The Rev. Deacon Annie Fritschner

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17:20-26

Christians are never more divided than we are every Sunday morning. We go to our separate churches of our preferred faiths. We sit in 'our' pews. And yet Jesus is so intent on our unity that his last prayer to God on our behalf is about reunion.

In John we overhear Him praying: "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..." As Jesus leaves his disciples and this kingdom He is so intent on our unity. Why? What difference does it make to our lives of faith?

Today is the Sunday between the feast of Jesus' Ascension into heaven and next Sunday's celebration of Pentecost. It is a time of anticipation but not of anxiety -a time of joy and celebration and movement towards the re-throned Christ. This is a time between mystery and completion, between the Ascension of the Christ and the fulfillment of the Trinity.

And as Christians, we are given another opportunity to live in mystery and suspend our need to analyze, to determine, and to control.

Again today when we repeat the Nicene Creed we will declare complete surrender to what we do not need to understand with our minds yet are willing to accept with our soul;

Jesus is God and is of God. Yet he was born of a human mother and a human father - born, made incarnate - just as we are, in the flesh. He loved, breathed, laughed, taught, preached, healed, ate, spent time with friends and with those who were threatened by him, and was killed by the state as a political prisoner. Killed by being nailed to a cross - a horrible death. He was removed from the cross, placed in a

grave of stone, and then after he died he came back to earth as a human - a person of flesh. Thomas was filled with wonder and Jesus understood this and let Thomas touch his wounds, so he could believe in Jesus' re-formed humanness. And then Jesus ascended to heaven and rejoined the one true source of all loving power, God.

Many Christians admit that they just 'skip over' believing this part of the creed because it isn't relevant to them. Yet Jesus' Ascension is essential to a living, active faithful people and to the unity of the church that Jesus prays for, because it invites us to live with mystery.

We do not have to know all the answers in order to believe.

We believe because, through God's grace, we are given a 'knowing' that comes not from the brain or the heart but from the soul; there are things we "know"; there are times we "know" and these are experiences of trusting in the unknown.

In a time when we are technologically so sophisticated and capable, trusting in the mysteries of God seems counter intuitive and yet is something we practice as a people; we pray. We pray in many different ways for all sorts of reasons and underlying them all is a need to be united with God and Christ and their deep, expansive, divine love that so far surpasses our human limitations. And we are united with one another when we pray.

*The Ascension also teaches us the spiritual practice of acceptance. It requires our surrender to the unknown and trusting that God *can and does and will* provide for us - like Jesus - beyond our wildest imaginations of good.*

In 1937, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a beautiful prayer that expresses our desire for surrender, the first part of which has entered into common use, but here it is in its entirety;

Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other.

Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.

Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.

Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;

That I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

Surrender to Divine authority, acceptance of the mystery of loving authority, and unification with God and Christ in the service we lovingly provide to others.

Years ago a man named Eric Rudolph exploded a pipe bomb in the center of Atlanta's Olympic Park and killed one person and injured 111 others. Eric was from Nantahala and he returned to the hills and hollers of WNC to hide out for almost 7 years. Rudolph was finally arrested in Murphy behind a Save-A-Lot store

My father suffered a stroke about that time and every month when I went to visit him in KY, one of his first questions was, 'Have they found him?' referring to Rudolph. "No Dad, they haven't found him yet." He asked me this over and over for years.

If Jesus had not ascended, we would probably go around like my dad asking, 'Have you found Him?' 'Have you seen Him?' 'Do you know where He is?' We would all want to tell our stories of Jesus sightings like we'd seen Steve Martin or some other star, separating ourselves from one another through our own self-importance.

But because Jesus has ascended and rejoined God, we no longer look for the one Jesus; we look for Jesus in the many - we look for the risen Christ in tens and hundreds and thousands of our neighbors, friends and strangers.

Jesus lives in us and we in Him and seeing the Christ in others is like coming home to God in ourselves, united in love for one brief "God moment".

Jesus' ascension also creates space for us to engage in ministry as He did. God called Jesus to serve; Jesus told and showed his apostles how to serve the weak and the poor, and the apostles engaged in service showing us, today's church, what to do and how to do it. And we here today are called to love the unwanted and to share this blessing of

ministry within the church and with those outside the church who do not yet know the joy and freedom of God's love.

*To paraphrase a passage of Isaiah so valued by Jesus:
The Spirit of God...is on us because God anointed us. He sent us to preach good news to the poor, heal the heartbroken, announce freedom to all captives, pardon all prisoners. God sent us to announce the year of his grace...and to comfort all who mourn...give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes, Messages of joy instead of news of doom, a praising heart instead of a languid spirit. (Isaiah 61:1-7)*

So although on Sundays we exercise our freedom to worship in unique or distinctive ways, we can be unified as a church and as a Christian people when, with God and Jesus, we surrender our lives in service. Christ is in us and we are in Christ and we, too, are sanctified and sent to be the hands and hearts of the ascended one. Alleluia!

Amen.