

## Together though Apart

John 17:6-19

Crossroads Christian Church

Acts 1:4-11

May 17, 2015 Ascension/Easter 7B

I'm sure that you noticed a slight problem with the video of our lesson from the Book of Acts today—the film credits that came marching across the screen as the story of the risen Christ progressed to the Ascension. Sorry about that. But it made me think of how cinematic a story this really is.

Just for fun, think about other ascensions that made great movie scenes; I'll just name 2--ET riding in the basket of Elliot's bike as it went across the moon; the alien spaceship rising from Devil's Tower in Wyoming with all its swirling lights, from Close Encounters of the Third Kind—and I'm sure that you can add your own. The mystery, the awe, the spectacle, they all make for powerful images, as something takes flight from this earth and soars into the sky.

On the surface, the story of the Ascension seems almost out of place. Jesus generally had an aversion to big, showy miracles. At the beginning of his ministry, he had flatly rejected the devil's idea of jumping off the peak of the temple and letting the angels catch him. Time after time, he would tell his disciples or people he healed, "don't tell anybody," after a healing. He rejected the Pharisee's demand for signs that he was the Messiah. And his rising from the tomb, the greatest miracle of all, was witnessed directly by no one. Only when the women, and later the men, went to the tomb to honor their dead friend, did they discover that the tomb was empty. And later still, he appeared to them; on the road to Emmaus, behind locked doors, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. And even the Ascension, spectacular as it was, was only seen by his followers. Jesus knew that big spectacular events in themselves wouldn't bring faith. Those who refused to believe would still refuse to believe. Those who believed only because of the spectacular event, their faith would be like seed planted in rocky soil. It would wither and die under the blaze of the hot sun.

First comes faith; absolute trust and commitment; and then, and only then, do we have the eyes to see what God would have us see. Corita Kent has a poster that has this wonderful verse:

To understand  
Is to stand under  
Which is to look up  
Which is a very good way  
To understand.

Let's go back to our first passage, from John 17:6-19, because it will help us understand what Jesus wanted his disciples to understand. First of all, the passage is a prayer. Jesus isn't addressing the disciples, but talking to his Father in Heaven. Yet, he's not talking to the disciples, but he is talking for them; he's advocating for them; he's asking God's help so that they might understand what Jesus wants for them. This chapter in John is

sometimes called Jesus' high priestly prayer, because Jesus is praying so deeply for his followers; because Jesus is asking God to work through *him* for *them*.

Think about a time that you've been prayed for. Maybe you were sick. Maybe you were grieving and broken hearted. Maybe you felt shut off from God or those you love because of your guilt. Maybe you were facing a dangerous situation. Then someone—a pastor, a chaplain, an elder, a parent, a friend—lifted your name in prayer and lovingly asked God to bring you healing; to bring you comfort; to bring you safety; to bring you hope. You were prayed for, and you knew, you just knew that it made a difference in your life. When you touch that feeling, you will touch upon how the disciples must have felt as they heard their Lord and Master praying for them. It was a dark and scary time. All they had dreamed for, all they had worked for, all they had hoped for was in danger of falling apart. But Jesus was lifting them up to God in prayer.

Meda Stamper, an English biblical scholar, notes this: "The verb *give* occurs 17 times in this chapter, more by far than in any other chapter of the New Testament. The uses of this verb tell the story of the prayer *in nuce*: The Father *gives* Jesus authority over all flesh to *give* eternal life to all whom God has *given* him. He has *given* Jesus work to do, but most of all in the section under consideration this week, it is a question of those whom God has *given* Jesus from the world. They were first the Father's own but are now Jesus' own. Jesus has *given* them words and indeed the word (*logos*) that the Father *gave* to him. But the prayer is about them, the given ones."<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

So what did he pray for? Here's verse 17 again. "I'm no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I'm coming to you. Holy Father, watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one." He wasn't praying for the world in general, but was praying for them—and indirectly for all his followers, so it would include us as well. First of all, he prays for God to "watch over them" that they may be protected in the dangerous times ahead. He, Jesus, had protected his disciples in their years together. He had always been there for them. They no longer belonged to the world, but they belonged to Jesus and to God; yet the world would threaten harm to them; the evil one would tempt them. Jesus asked God to protect them for their own sake, but more, for the sake of their mission; and the sake of their mission was to redeem the world.

Jesus prayed that they might be one, just as Jesus and God were one. He wanted them to feel united with God, united with Jesus, and united together. And Jesus still prays that we might be one today.

He wanted them—and us—to share completely in God's joy. That joy would come as they came to know God's love better and better, and also as

---

<sup>1</sup> Meda Stamper, Commentary on John 17:6-19, Workingpreacher.org.

they went out and changed the world in Christ's name. What could be more joyful than knowing in your heart that God's love is filling your heart, and that you were able to share this joy with others?

He wrapped up this part of the prayer by asking that the disciples would be made holy in the truth. It's the same thing that we pray in the Lord's Prayer—hallowed be thy name; holy be thy name; sanctified be thy name. But it's asking that this holiness of God fill the disciples' hearts—and ours. They, and we, are set apart to be God's agents of love; God's actions of love.

Protection, unity, love, joy, holiness—all these things Jesus asked God to give his followers. Jesus knew that with these gifts they—and we—could bring light to a dark world; could bring hope to a hopeless world; could bring love to a hateful world; could bring joy to an anxious world; could bring life to a world dominated by death.

That was before Christ's arrest, trial, and crucifixion. That was before Christ's resurrection. Later, after the risen Christ had revealed himself to the disciples in many ways and many times, the time had come for him to part; the time we call the Ascension.

Yes, it's great theatre to think of Christ swooping up into the clouds, until all you can see are his feet, then nothing. In an earthly sense, they would walk with him no more. They would hear his voice teaching them no more. They would see his face no more. They would eat with him no more. They would touch his hand no more.

Up until this point, Jesus was always a physical presence in their midst. He was always there, at a given time, and a given place, but not anywhere else. Now came a BIG transition. They would never see him with their eyes again, but they would know that wherever they were, he would still be with them. Instead of just being in one place, the risen Christ would be with them wherever they went. Go, do my work. Receive the power of my Spirit, and take the Good News from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth. Remember how the story progressed in the Book of Acts as we've studied it on Wednesday nights? And what did he promise in Matthew? I will be with you. Always. Until the end of the Age. Though apart from the physical Jesus, we are together with the Risen Christ. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon