

7 Easter, Yr. A

May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-16, John 17:1-11

I would like to focus today on the readings from Acts and John. And I think it would be helpful if we looked first at the time line here. We first heard the Acts reading, which is about Jesus ascending into heaven. But then we bounce back to the reading from John's gospel. That reading is from a part of the Gospel known as the Farewell Discourse and it recounts a time before the crucifixion and the resurrection. In fact, it's taking place at the Last Supper, after Jesus has demonstrated what loving service looks like by washing the feet of all the disciples, including Judas. So let's look at them in that sequence.

This whole section, which we've been hearing for some weeks, is heavily theological and parts are pretty abstract. Someone has said that you can find yourself nodding along to sections in John, sections like we heard just now, with repetitive language and complex concepts, and then getting to the end and saying, "Now what was that about?" So it behooves us to stop and examine some of those concepts, like "glory" and "eternal life" and what it means to know God.

We have talked about glory before. When we think glory, perhaps we think of something awesome or majestic. In the Hebrew it's tied to weight, not in the sense of pounds,

but in the sense of influence. So think of someone throwing their weight around in a negative sense, or, more positively, saying about someone that their opinion carries a lot of weight. So a connection would also be made to reputation and, more importantly for our reading, NAME. So you'll note in the Gospel, that Jesus says that he made God's name known. A step further is to essence: to make God's name known would be to somehow show forth his essence, who God really is. A little further and the meaning stretches to presence. So when Jesus talks about glorifying God, what he's saying, essentially, is that he made God known, he made God present and he did that, not only by his teaching, but by his very life. It's been said that to look at Jesus is to see God. And when we look, what do we see? Not a God of wrath and judgment, not a God keeping track of our sins and failings, not a God that delights in dangling sinners over a fiery pit. No. None of that. Instead we see care, compassion, forgiveness, welcome.

It's been said that that one verse in this reading, about eternal life, which reads **AND THIS IS ETERNAL LIFE, THAT THEY MAY KNOW YOU, THE ONLY TRUE GOD, AND JESUS CHRIST WHOM YOU HAVE SENT**, is one of the central sentences in Christianity. Eternal life is knowing God. There's the next essential concept. What does it mean to know God? You will have heard about the

Gnostics and their emphasis on knowledge. But the knowledge they were talking about was a secret, special knowledge, known only to a chosen few, a kind of arrogant, exclusive, insider knowledge – kind of like a secret password or handshake. The kind of knowledge John is talking about is different. It's both intellectual, creedal, a knowing ABOUT God, but it's also the kind of knowledge we gain by being in a relationship with God. I remember hearing a story about a couple of people who met. They were both friendless and they both thought having a friend would be a great idea. So they both read everything they could find about friendship, attending seminars and lectures, but they never actually spent any time together to get to be in a relationship. Head knowledge, knowing ABOUT God is necessary but it's not sufficient. Here, the Hebrew word is yada, which means the kind of knowledge that comes from experience and intimacy with someone. Jesus came, Jesus became incarnate, so that we could come to KNOW God through him, so that he could reveal God's face, God's presence, God's essence, to us. Coming to know God certainly requires the knowledge that we gained through Jesus, and it also means putting ourselves into God's presence, praying, abiding with God, another favorite image of John's. Just like human relationships, it takes effort, time and trust.

What John is saying here then, is that eternal life isn't something that happens after you die. He's saying that it's available to you here and now in the quality of life you can have if you come to know God and, knowing God, come to participate in God's life and in God's plan for the world. We know what that is – it's the Kingdom. That state of affairs that will exist when God's will is finally done. And here we can come back to daily life a bit. Thomas Cahill, writing about what Jesus said and where we can find Jesus today, reminds us to read Matthew 25, in which Jesus says that whatever we do for the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to and for him. His words are challenging:

“It's ironic, that some Christians make such a fuss about the elements of the Eucharist – bowing before them, kneeling in adoration, because Christ is present in them – but have never bothered to heed those solemn words about the presence of Christ in every individual who is in need....And it is perverse that some Christians make such a fuss about the bound text of God's Word, carrying it processionally, holding it with reverence, never allowing it to touch the ground, but have never considered seriously the text of Matthew 25, in the light of which we would always catch God's needy people before they hit the ground.” (*The Desire of the Everlasting Hills*)

Everything we've looked at so far is theologically weighty. Before we end, I'd like to say a word about the Ascension. You'll remember last week that I suggested that humor and play were things that we should add to our daily list? Well, this falls into that category. It's a story told by Fr. Edward Hayes, a priest who ran a retreat center in Kansas, settling there only after he spent a couple of years traveling the world and studying world religions. He wrote incredibly wise and sometimes humorous stories after his travels and one of those was about the Ascension.

Once a great spiritual master gathered all his disciples and lovingly told them he was returning to his Father, but that he would eventually return and take them to heaven with them. They were devastated; they wept and pleaded with him to stay, but he comforted them and blessed them and then, with his eyes raised to heaven, he prayed, 'Father, I am ready,' and he began to ascend. The followers buried their faces in their hands, weeping. But one of them, the beloved disciple, cried out, "Master, don't leave me..." and he jumped up and grasped the Master's ankle. This, of course, caused the Master to stall in mid-air, listing to one side as the disciples dangled below. "Let go, my friend, let go. You know I must ascend to the father, but you are not ready." But the disciple hung on.

The master looked up and prayed, "Father, what should I do?" And a voice came from heaven, "Ascend, my son, ascend." And with great effort he began to ascend once more, with the beloved disciple still hanging on to his left leg.

Now I need not tell you that the mood on the mountain underwent a radical change while all this was happening. The other disciples had always resented the close friendship the Master and the beloved disciple had, so they all began shouting at him to let go. The rest of the crowd all looked on in amazement. Suddenly the Master's mother ran from the crowd and with a great leap grabbed her son's other ankle, once again stalling the ascension. "Mother," he said, "you know I must return to my Father, please let go." But she, like his friend, just held on tighter and looked up at him with a sweet smile.

He asked his Father's advice again, and heard again the voice telling him to ascend. So he mustered all his strength and once more began, ever so slowly to move upward.

At that moment, as if some invisible signal had been given, all the disciples ran forward and began jumping in the air, grabbing legs and ankles, wrists and arms. And seconds later, the rest of the crowd began jumping up to grasp the disciples. Those already airborne reached down to offer hands to those still on the ground. Then, out of the

forest that crowned the mountaintop, came bears and foxes, birds and bugs, flowers and bushes and they too jumped upward and were given a hand. Now what had begun as a beautiful religious experience had suddenly been turned into a circus act. And as the Master ascended, a vast pyramid of people, animals and vegetation rose into the sky over the mountain top.

Hays ends the story by saying that at that moment the Master was enlightened and understood that his mission on earth was to be a giant skyhook. (*St. George and the Dragon and the Search for the Holy Grail*, modified)

There's power as well as humor in that story. I invite you to think about it further – to see the connectedness, and maybe especially in these times, the care for one another and for the entire creation. All of us, connected to Christ and one another, moving ever more deeply into the heart of God. Amen.