



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, May 28, 2017

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

FR. CHARLES WITKE

Acts 1:6-14 | Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36 | I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 | John 17:1-11

Luke tells us in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning that Jesus ordered the apostles not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father, which is the coming of the Holy Spirit. And so they waited, and we wait along with them for the coming of Pentecost Sunday a week from today.

In our society it is powerless people who do a lot of waiting. It's a way for the powerful people to show their power over others, a way for the dentist to deal with three or four patients at once, a way for petty bureaucrats and office workers to show who's on top. In the army individual initiative of recruits is ground away by pointless waiting after hurrying to begin the pointless waiting. And poor people especially do an awful lot of waiting: waiting for the welfare check, waiting for the bus, waiting for the lottery to smile upon them, waiting for that telephone call that says work has come. In the breakfast program downstairs here telephones are much in use. Cell phones, even occasionally the kitchen land-line, are lifelines that guests use for just that purpose: trying to line up work. Indeed, powerless and poor people spend a lot of time waiting for others to decide their future. And when we are in airport security lines, we wait a lot unless we are in the first-class express line.

The institutional church has done a lot of waiting too. The Apostles waited on Jesus' instructions for nine days until Pentecost, but they were also told by the mysterious men in white robes at the Ascension that Jesus will come in the same way they saw him go into heaven. And we've all been waiting for that second coming ever since.

That anticipated return of Jesus was thought by Paul and his followers to be imminent, but as time went on and it didn't happen, the church worked on her theology and her organizing skills while waiting century after century. "Jesus will come" the church proclaims, and the church learned along with the poor and the powerless how to wait.

After Jesus tells the apostles to wait, they ask him a question: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They want safety, a secure kingdom. They've been asked to wait, and they want to know what the agenda is.

Will Jesus return and restore the nation's independence, liberating the people from the Romans and setting up a revolutionary government? And Jesus doubtless disappoints them by saying it is not for them to know the times or periods for this. Jesus' answer has been variously misunderstood; he's not saying that he's just a spiritual adviser; he's not saying as some would have it that he doesn't mix politics and religion, that he's in recruitment and marketing not management, that he doesn't want to lose his 501 C-3 tax status. He's not rebuking his followers for asking this, but telling them that it's not for them and of course it's not for us either to know the timetable of the great upsets of history, the schedule of revolutions. God only knows how long it will take to bring freedom and justice to the world.

The apostles of course have asked their question of Jesus out of their powerlessness. Jesus has always done a lot for them, and now he is leaving them. "When will you do this for us and free Israel?" Jesus tells them that they themselves are the answer: "You will receive power;... you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." Jesus won't be around to do it for them, and he isn't around to do it for us either. The firestorm of strength descending at Pentecost will enable and energize them to do Jesus' work.

It continues to enable us to grasp that we are not powerless, that we are called to continue that work here, and to be his witnesses to his message of reconciliation and freedom and liberation throughout the world.

And so the infant church waited and prayed for nine days until Pentecost, and at Pentecost learned to walk on its own. It learned that divine protection is not the same as security. Under that protection it overcame any of their insecurity about going to the ends of the earth. And the church today waits and prays. Jesus ends his time on earth and takes his powers to heaven precisely so that the people of God may have the experience, the priceless grace, of participation in a community's power, and learn that is ultimately limitless. He leaves us so that we can grow in learning our strength, and exercising the power of our witness to a revolutionary gospel everywhere in the world.

In this holy Easter season drawing to its close the church witnesses Jesus' departure and then the outpouring of his delegated power, that delegated power given to the church, to us today. Jesus still runs a hands-on operation, but the hands are our hands, for Jesus isn't here any more to do it for us. Shall we sit in our upper rooms and wait for the kingdom? Shall we in our mistaken sense of powerlessness continue to question when the world will be better, justice prevail, the poor fed?

Or shall we listen when Jesus tells us that we ourselves are the answer to the question about restoring the kingdom of God? It would seem that a lot right now depends on our answers to that question. May God give us discernment as we set about finding our own answers.

Amen.