

Sermon Easter VII Year A 2011

Acts 1:6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

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Lately, I have been thinking a lot about agendas. I help develop quite a few agendas for meetings. Over time, the agendas of groups that I work with tend to change. Work is accomplished and new tasks come to the fore. But there are some agendas that don't seem to change. And those unchanging agendas are the ones that I have been encountering lately. I am thinking here of political agendas and social or domestic agendas. The same is also true of religious agendas. They don't seem to change over time. These agendas have a way of becoming fixed and unchanging.

That seems to be the case in our lesson from the Book of Acts, as we hear the disciples share their agenda. You see, the disciples could not separate themselves from the historic Jewish notion that someday the nation of Israel, God's chosen covenant community, would be restored to preeminence. If those who spent three years with Jesus and were witnesses to his crucifixion and resurrection had a hard time reorienting their vision and expectation, it is not a wonder that we have trouble in our own day as well. The resurrected Jesus had been with them for some time preparing them for his coming departure. But the disciples had a different agenda, a different focus. Now, they were anxious to move Jesus in the direction of their agenda. They longed to return to the agenda when Jesus was greeted on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They greeted Jesus with shouts of Hosanna, as they hoped that Jesus would begin to enact the agenda that the people of Israel had long hoped for. Now,

deep into the post-resurrection period, the disciples return to their agenda.

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

It is hard to know how much frustration Jesus may have expressed in his response since we can't hear his tone of voice. But we can appreciate the answer “no” when he said, “it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” Enough of such questioning because I have plans for you, he seems to say. It is not about looking back to some prior notion. It is not about recapturing some lost glory as desirable as that seems.

Jesus says that God is not about going back. In fact the times when God will establish things are not of our concern. The end of time is not for us to know. Jesus instead focuses on something entirely different. Life in the kingdom of God is not about going back. It's about stepping out in faith, united to one another and with God. The kingdom of God is coming now. Jesus has a mission in mind for the disciples, but he knows that to move forward into **any new vision** can be frightening and scary. And to alleviate their fear and concern, Jesus focuses **on how God will empower** the disciples for the work that God envisions them doing. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Not power to beat down or control others but a special power; a power that will make them witnesses and evangelists. Witnesses who can share the story of God with others. They will be Jesus' witnesses at home where they are comfortable, like Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. But this power will also take them far away. They will leave home and move into unfamiliar cultures to a people they do not know, even to the ends of the earth.

Then after that encouragement Jesus was lifted up and ascended to the Father. Two angels assured the disciples that Jesus will come again in the same way that he departed. The disciples left and traveled the short distance from

Olivet to Jerusalem to the familiar upper room. The upper room was the place where the faithful gathered continually for prayer during this in-between time. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, wants us to know that this early group of faithful followers was not limited to the eleven disciples. There were others as well, including certain women.

The group that gathered in the upper room was not a vague group of supporters. No, the faithful included the disciples as well as certain faithful women without whom the mission of God in the world could not succeed. This group at its earliest stage represented the full faith community and was constantly devoting themselves to prayer. The faithful gathered and prayed as they awaited the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, it was an in-between time.

Today in the church calendar is known as “Expectation Sunday.” Three days after the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus, today is a major seam in the church year. We are between two key points, we are waiting. Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the throne of God, and we await the arrival of the promised Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter on the Feast of Pentecost next Sunday.

We know something of the sense of expectation that we experience at such in-between times. We too gather today in expectation. School has ended and graduations have occurred, summer has begun. Summer is a season of expectation. This morning brings its own expectation as we commission a faithful group of disciples who have studied the EfM curriculum together weekly for four years. They have been living into a sense of expectation for some time.

We spend so much of our lives in “in-between times” as well don’t we? We live between one major event and another. I suspect that most of our lives

are really in-between times. The everyday, the ordinary, the routine. What did the disciples do? Having come through another crisis they gathered together and prayed. When we find ourselves at points of transition and decision or in times of great anxiety and change, we would do well to follow their model as they stayed together in prayer. They drew strength from one another and from prayer. They trusted in the promises of Jesus.

Jesus promised them that they would be his witnesses. Our gospel lesson from John suggests a continuous history of revelation from God to Jesus to the disciples and finally to the church. This is our history, our inheritance. We pass it on each time we gather here in prayer. Each time we tell the story. Each time we listen in love to one another. That process of gathering faithfully each week in prayer and worship forms us as the people of God, disciples of Jesus. This weekly gathering prepares us as it has prepared generations before us. Then empowered by the promised Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter, we are sent out as disciples of Jesus, witnesses in our part of God's creation. We continue the work that Jesus came to do. Work that Jesus imparted to us prior to his departure as captured in Matthew 25. In as much as we have freed the captives, fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned, we have done this to Jesus as well. That is the work that I have found you passionately committed to as witnesses of Jesus.

I know this because two weeks ago I met an amazing young woman. Her life had been powerfully influenced as she grew up with some of the witnesses of Jesus Christ from St. John's and her community, some of those "certain women" that the Bible speaks of. Those certain women shared their lives with this young girl as she grew up. They helped her with her studies, with her moral

standards, with her sense of responsibility and self-worth. Through their loving and faithful ministry, they helped her to listen to the voice of God in her life. They helped her to understand the bright future that was hers.

Last Sunday afternoon this amazing woman graduated from high school. Why is that amazing? Well, she is the youngest of six children and yet she is the first one, the first child in her family to graduate from high school. That is an incredible accomplishment in itself, but there is more. She has clear plans for the future. She has been accepted to college to study nursing and has been awarded a scholarship to support her studies. Her future is bright and I dare say that it was transformed by her coming to know these witnesses of Jesus, these certain women. What an impact these faithful disciples had in this young woman's life.

So be careful in coming here each week, because in worshipping and praying together you too are being made into witnesses of Jesus Christ. Yes, we too have an agenda, an agenda given by Jesus to the disciples and passed on to us. We are witnesses of Jesus and our task is to assist in bringing in the very kingdom of God. We are sent into the world to share the love of Jesus. And in the process, lives are changed in amazing ways. Who would have guessed? But then that is the way God works, empowering us to be Christ's hands and feet in the world around us, his witnesses. "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women." Certain women, indeed!