

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 1:6-14, Psalm 68, John 17:1-11
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June 1, 2014

The seventh Sunday after Easter is a peculiar Sunday if not the most peculiar of the entire church year. It might be best called "Absence Sunday" or "In-Between Sunday." Why do I say that?

In the first reading from Acts, we heard of Jesus' departure or Ascension. Earlier in Acts the author stated that Jesus had remained with his disciples 40 days after his resurrection. Last Thursday was the official Ascension Day, the 40th day after Easter Sunday. A few of us recognized that feast day after early Bible Study by reading the other Ascension story at the end of Luke's gospel, praying the collect for Ascension Day, and then releasing a helium balloon. We watched it slowly climb high in the sky until it eventually disappeared from our sight.

So this Sunday Jesus has already ascended, and we await Pentecost, which is next Sunday, when the Holy Spirit will descend. In the meantime, we are without Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Both are temporarily absent. We are in between for 10 days. Some have suggested we might have even extinguished the paschal candle this Sunday right after reading the Acts passage to symbolize and highlight Jesus being taken up and away from the disciples. The light has gone up and away.

If we did that this Sunday, then next Sunday we would have to give everyone a small candle to hold. We could light them after the Acts reading on Pentecost to symbolize the flames that lighted on each of the disciples. We won't do it if we are outside, but it would further emphasize that once Jesus has ascended to heaven, his ministry is now ours to carry out. He is the big light and we are the smaller lights. Together, however, our cumulative light is brighter. Remember Jesus said once he was gone, we would do greater works.

A young believer was having trouble getting his act together and decided to take his frustration out on God. He shook his fist at the heavens and said, "What a terrible world this is! Even I could make a better world than this one!" And then from deep inside he heard God's answer, "That's what you're supposed to do."

I don't read many comics, but I still love to read Peanuts. For the last several days, Linus has been patting birds on the head. They like it and he likes to do it. His older sister, Lucy, however, doesn't like it because people are talking about it, and she likes to be bossy and call the shots. She tells him in no uncertain terms to stop it. Linus turns to Charlie Brown and asks him what is wrong with patting birds on the head. Charlie first says that it humiliates his older sister for people to keep coming up to her and telling her about her younger brother. And then he tells Linus that no one else does it. Sadly the next day a bird approaches Linus for a pat on the head, and he doesn't do it. Linus walks on past and says, "Sorry, bird." We can't let the Lucy's or Charlie Brown's of the world shame us from being exceptionally good to God's little ones even if

no one else does it. Christian ministry at its best is giving love when it is least deserved because that is when it is needed most.

A literal picture of Jesus floating up to heaven in a cloud is easy to imagine but hard to believe. The concept of Jesus joining or rejoining the Father in heaven is essential to our faith, however. Where is heaven – beyond the clouds? in outer space? Carl Sagan, the famous astronomer, cosmologist and astrophysicist, said, “If Jesus traveled at the speed of light for 2,000 years, he would still be in our galaxy.”

Jesus ascends not to outer space but to inward space, both in and beyond, to God’s space. The cloud is the symbolic doorway between heaven and earth. It’s part of both worlds as heaven and earth are not all that far removed from one another. Jesus brings our humanity to heaven to be in God. The Father sent Jesus to us. Now Jesus brings us to the Father. In this way he prepares a place for us.

Jesus has to ascend or transcend so he can send us the Spirit – heaven sent to dwell in us – and, as I said earlier, so we can carry on Jesus’ work of being the face, hands and feet of Jesus and spreading heaven’s invitation and graces everywhere we go.

In both the reading from Acts and the reading from John, Jesus is leaving the disciples. In the 17th chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus is praying for the disciples just moments before his arrest and his crucifixion the next day. It’s a poignant prayer in which Jesus pours out his love and concern for his disciples. He also seems to give them credit for a faithfulness they hardly deserve. They compete with one another for greatness. Peter oversteps his place on several occasions. They are about to scatter when Jesus is arrested and refuse to believe the women’s story that he is risen. And yet here Jesus says of them:

...they have kept your word.

...they know that everything you have given me is from you.

...they believed that you sent me.

One of my fears as a priest is that I will misrepresent a deceased member of the church in my funeral homily. I will say things that are inaccurate or cause people to wonder who I am talking about perhaps making the person to be more holy than he or she was in real life. I do try to accentuate the positive, however.

I’ll never forget the time as a young, assistant priest at St. Stephen’s, the senior rector asked me to do a funeral for a family I didn’t know. As was my custom, I went to the home. The grandfather had died. I asked the son, his wife and their grown children to tell me some good qualities about the man that I could use in a prayer at the funeral. There was a long silence. Finally, the son said, “We don’t have anything good to say about him.” They all nodded in agreement.

I did get them to finally say he was a good provider and maybe one other positive attribute which I included at his burial service. That was challenging for sure and the first and last time I had that problem.

If Jesus can have so much good to say and pray to his Father about his less than perfect disciples, we might be confident that Jesus sees all the best in us as well, even if we haven't fully realized it in ourselves. When people treat us as if we are better than we are, we are more likely to become that better person. We need to see and speak of the best in others. It is way too easy to find fault and be negative.

Twice recently I have heard it said, "People may not remember exactly what you did or what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel." If we are Jesus' beloved – and we are – we can naturally treat everyone else as Jesus' beloved. We can pat more birds on the head.

In fact, even now, Jesus is not absent because he lives in you and in me. Just look around and see Jesus everywhere. AMEN.