

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

May 24, 2020  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter

John 14:15-21  
Acts 1:6-14  
Psalm 68:1-10,33-36  
1 Peter 4:12-14;5:6-11

---

This morning, I want us to enter into our text from Acts and wonder. I want us to wonder about what it was like for the disciples, after spending those wonderful, joy filled days with Jesus after his resurrection. I want us to wonder about how comforted they must have been to have their beloved friend and teacher back with them. Surely they had lived through the deepest pain of Christ's death and experienced the greatest joy upon his return. Despair transformed into hope. It must have been absolutely amazing to have him back among them.

Now I want us to wonder about what it was like to lose him again, to watch him leave their side and rise up right in front of their eyes and disappear into an unknown expanse of atmosphere. Another loss. Another change. Another shift in what they thought life would be.

How did they feel that day? Were they happy or hopeless? Were they content or confused? We aren't told. We are only told that they prayed.

I don't know about you but I pray for lots of reasons. Sometimes I pray because I am hurt or angry. Sometimes I pray because I am scared and have lost direction. Sometimes I pray because I am grateful for things in my life. Prayer is an act that for me grows out of countless circumstances and emotions. It can bring me to my knees. It can bring me to tears. It can also make me laugh with pure joy.

So, the fact that we are told the disciples go to pray doesn't tell us much about how they felt.

However, the one thing that I always envision when I think of that moment when Jesus ascends into heaven is that they don't want Jesus to leave. I picture them reaching their arms up, standing on their tip toes, trying to hold on just for one more moment. And, then as Jesus disappears, I imagine they let their arms fall back to their sides. Their heels come softly back to the ground and I envision them standing there in the silence of the moment letting their gaze slowly turn away from the sky. They walk away experiencing a range of emotions and then they pray. But what did they pray for? How did they pray?

I don't know about you but I would feel rather discouraged. My prayers would utter my confusion and my loneliness. They would utter my resistance to what is and my desire to turn back the clock to some other time, when things were "better". My prayers would be my plea for life to be anything other than what it was in that very moment. I might even be angry or hurt that Jesus was gone. How could he leave?

Now, maybe the disciples would have been better sports. Maybe they would have been more faithful than I would be at the loss of Jesus. Or, maybe they would have simply been grateful for the extra time they got with Jesus.

But, it's that ambiguity that I love about our passage from Acts. It leaves us with space to wonder. Wonder how the disciples felt and how they might have prayed. And it leaves us with the reassurance that whatever the disciples prayed for, however they expressed their prayers, whatever was on their hearts, God heard them. And God understood.

What does that mean for us? It means that whatever our prayers, whatever we take to God, be it anger or fear or hope or gratitude, God's got our back. In many ways, the disciples' story in Acts reminds us that God is big enough and loving enough to hold whatever we give to him. Take that in...God can hold whatever you give him. All of your needs, all of your fears, all of the joy and all of the sorrow.

Listen to the words from 1 Peter – *“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”*

If you have known God through uncertain times, you understand the promise of these words. It is a promise that nothing can tear you away from God's love for you. No shame, no grief, no regret, no anger, no betrayal, no sadness...nothing.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel once wrote:

*“To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live.”*

He later commented that *“Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul.”* (Yes, he actually wrote in 1945 about a quarantine for the soul.)

Setting aside your soul so that God can take care of it. What a beautiful way to think about prayer.

And there is one other thing I want you to hear this morning. In our Gospel reading from John, we find Jesus and his disciples gathered together eating their last meal with one another. It was a holy and sacred moment. And in that moment, Jesus steps aside from his friends and prays to God. Jesus prays to God for his disciples saying, *“Holy Father, protect them in your name....”*

I imagine the disciples over hearing Jesus' prayers for them. I imagine them feeling deeply loved and cared for in that moment. Because what they heard was the loving reassurance that God was going to be with them as they moved into the uncertain times ahead. That whatever they might face, whatever they might feel, whatever they might do, that God was going to be with them.

Let me state this...I don't imagine that prayer always comes easy. I am sure that not everyone listening to this sermon believes that prayer can make a difference. I am also certain that some of us will find it hard to pray for things we don't want God to know about...the things we are too ashamed to speak of or confess. I am certain some of you will think...why would God listen to me anyway? I'm just one person among so many.

I get it. But, remember this...Jesus, in praying for his disciples, also prayed for all of us. Jesus has already prayed to God to take care of you. So, when you have a hard time praying, when you are unsure if God can handle it or even if God will hear...I want you to imagine Jesus saying these words for you, "Holy Father, protect them in your name...." But I want to place your name in that prayer so that Jesus prays for you. Holy Father, protect Sam. Holy Father, protect Jackie and Sally. Holy Father, protect Billy. Holy Father, protect Will and Ashley. Holy Father, protect RJ and Charlie. You get the idea. Let Jesus pray for you.

And then, be willing to pray to God. Even if it's hard to trust...give it a try. Put all of your worries and concerns in God's hand. God can handle it. God loves you and listens to you. What a beautiful promise given to each and every one of us.

Remember this simple premise from Rabbi Heschel...prayer is the ability for each of us to set aside our soul so that God can take care of it. Let God take care of you.

Be Blessed. Thanks be to God. Amen.