

WHILE WE ARE WAITING
Acts 1: 6-14; John 17: 1-11
Seventh Sunday of Easter • May 24, 2020
by Pat Berger

Jesus told the disciples to go back to Jerusalem and wait: they would be baptized with Holy Spirit in not so many days. So they went back to that room in Jerusalem, and they waited. We have all waited -- in a doctor's office; for a check to arrive; for the sun to come out two days in a row. Or: to be able to get a haircut! To go out to lunch! For a quick stop at Fred Meyer not to be the adventure of the week! And I'm sure many of us can remember small voices in the backseat of a car on road trips: are we there yet? What do you do while you are waiting? Possibly you read, or drum your fingers, or wash the dishes; or perhaps you are one who is good at just sitting and waiting.

The disciples, we are told in the Book of the Acts, devoted themselves to prayer while they waited. At this point, they were waiting for Holy Spirit, the Advocate promised to them by Jesus. After the crucifixion, the disciples and some women including Mary, and Jesus' brothers, went back to the "room upstairs where they were staying," and they prayed. Jesus had told them what it was that they were to do: they would do the kinds of things that they had seen him doing, and even greater things than those. Jesus had told them where they would do these things: they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and in fact to the ends of the earth. They weren't, though, to do these things without God's instruction and presence and guidance; they weren't to do them on their own; so right then: they must wait. They had a job to do -- and at that, a job given to them by Jesus, by God -- and the first thing they had to do was: WAIT. They would wait together, and they would wait in prayer; they would hear from God. They didn't know exactly what they would hear from God -- they just knew that they would hear. This waiting may have been as difficult for them as it would have been if Jesus had just said, now, go, get to work, do something. They would wait, though, because they had learned to expect great things when God spoke, and they knew that they would play major parts in whatever it was that God had planned.

They knew this in part because of the time that they had spent with Jesus, watching and listening and learning from him. Jesus waited, often with his disciples, and prayed, openly and intimately, and then waited some more. Jesus' prayer that we are privileged to overhear this morning from John's gospel is one that the disciples heard, too, and it is clear that Jesus wanted for his followers the same relationship with God that he had had. The language can sound as if it is going in circles: "They were yours," Jesus said, "and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; . . . All mine are yours and yours are mine; . . ." When we listen carefully,

we can hear the invitation, to the disciples and to those of us who follow two thousand years later: God's love was for Jesus, and it was for all who followed Jesus then, and it is for all of us now; for all of the beloved children, while we wait.

The verses that we heard today from John's Gospel are closer to the end of what we remember as Jesus' Farewell Discourse, which begins at chapter 13 and finishes at the end of chapter 17. For most of what is there, Jesus was instructing his disciples; in chapter 17, Jesus prayed for his disciples. Jesus and those disciples were sitting around a table, after having just eaten. They were talking together about what would be happening to Jesus soon -- his upcoming death, the expectations of them after his death. It was a long and likely painful conversation. And then, Jesus looked up to heaven, and began to address the one he knew as Father. Imagine sitting there: Jesus had washed your feet. He had told all of you of his coming betrayal. He would send you the Spirit, which would stay with you always; you would not be left orphaned. And now, Jesus began to pray for you.

Jesus also asked to be glorified, that he might in turn glorify God. What is glory? That is one of those words that is tough to pin down; it can mean great honor and fame -- and it can mean sun, as in that orb in the sky, so it can have to do with shining. It can surround us; it can enter us. Here, we need to think of it within the scope of God's love for us. Jesus wanted to be glorified so that he could give eternal life to all who had been given to him. And how did Jesus define "eternal life?" "And this is eternal life," he said; "that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Is that how you have thought of eternal life? That eternal life consists of knowing God and Jesus, really knowing them? To one way of thinking, that sounds pretty simple; sure, we know -- there is one God, and Jesus was his only-begotten Son. There we have it. In John's Gospel, we can be sure, it isn't quite that easy. To know, in John, means to be in relationship with -- to be in relationship with God and Jesus. So what does that mean?

Our readings from both John and the Acts this morning give us a few clues. First, we notice that the believers all spent a good deal of time together. That must be a part of knowing God and Jesus: to spend time with the holy ones and with friends in Christ -- friends in this congregation, we might think, and all others who are our friends because of God's love for us. And these people constantly devoted themselves to prayer. We can do that. It doesn't matter where we are -- we can pray. It doesn't matter how we phrase our prayer; as long as we are talking with God and Jesus, they will be listening and be a part of the act. It doesn't even matter what we choose to talk about in our prayer, as long as it is something that is in our hearts that occurs to us might be shared with those who love all of the beloved children. And we might remember that we never pray alone: in John, Jesus prayed with his disciples, and for all who followed, and later Jesus prayed with his followers then, and prays with his followers ever since. There is holy relationship. And it can be ours, even as we wait.

Wherever we read in John, we can see what it means to be in relationship with Jesus and God. Jesus talked about those who believed in him keeping his commandments. How does it feel when we are attentive to keeping those commandments? Love one another as I have loved you, Jesus said. How does it feel when you perform an act of love? Can you feel God being a part of that action? We know we cannot do some of these things on our own, and when we pay attention, we can feel divine help as we help and teach and walk beside another. Trust that feeling. Jesus has ascended; we are here. We are the ones now, who perform actions that Jesus performed, and actions even greater than these as he said we would, and the Divine Ones are counting on us to be holy presence here and now.

Jesus would be leaving them, he told the disciples; they would be staying, for now. Eventually they would be with Jesus again, but for right then there was work to be done, and they were the ones privileged to get to do it, as are we now. David Lose writes that,

. . . being left behind [in this case] is an honor, an invitation to participate in the glory of [God], a commissioning, in fact, into the work of the Son. Eternal life, glory, relationship with God -- in John's Gospel, these aren't things waiting out there somewhere but instead are all around us. . . . in doing what Jesus does. Healing, feeding, caring, listening, sharing, making manifest the grace and mercy of the God who so loved the world.

We do these things, and we do other things. Every day. Think of the things you do every day that, when you do them lovingly and with care, make someone's life easier or more pleasant and so, in the doing, you honor God. When we work, when we play, when we do things for and with our families, when we volunteer in the community and in the church -- all of those things can and do help the divine children who are so loved by our God, and the result is we are participants in God's glory. It matters what we do, not just this one hour every week, but every hour of every week. While we wait.

I will finish with another quote from Dr. Lose:

Some Christians believe this life is simply practice for the next one. . . . But in this passage we have the two-fold promise: 1) God is with us to help us not merely persevere but also to flourish (that's what Holy Spirit, Advocate, is!) and 2) God intends us to be committed to this world, this people, this place, here and now. Glory, eternity, relationship with God -- these things are always in the present tense in John's Gospel, and we are commissioned and blessed to participate in this work and to share this amazing promise.

While we wait. May it ever be so. Let us pray.