

The Left Behinds May 28, 2017

Acts 1: 1-11
Psalm 47 p. 781
Ephesians 1: 15-23
Luke 24: 44-53

INTRODUCTION:

And so here we are, opening the 2017 season of the Beaverkill Church, together once again, and that is a very wonderful thing. It is always heartwarming to be singing, extending our hands, praying with one another after such a long time of being apart or at least outside of this church and its rituals and the ways that it has of making your brain and being function.

So it's interesting that we start off this season with the readings about ascension, in which Jesus, after he has been resurrected from the dead, then leaves everyone behind and rises into heaven. (I always visualize the ascension as a kind of space picture - man in white, hands by the sides, head up, then Whoosh, up you go.) And behind, at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, stood all those people who had worked with Jesus - the disciples, the followers, the helpers - now the Left Behinds. And you can't help but wonder what they must have been thinking. I mean, really, they had been following him all this time, and it can't have been easy, and then he just says to them, "It's not for you to know," and then he just goes whoosh into the sky.

Now for many people, the ascension of Jesus into heaven to "sit on the right hand of God" has led them to take religion as their partner in the contemplation of the afterlife. If Jesus went to heaven to sit by God, then heaven is what I must be thinking about as well when I think about God and Jesus. Or, perhaps it is a concentration upon the

inner life, the soul, the spirit, the way one's mind works. In either case it is the focus of the individual upon what they can perceive of or open themselves to of the holy spirit.

Now, that lofty sense of spirit is intoxicating, but the disciples and the followers were left not only with that but also with Jesus' lessons, his memory and his sense of mission. They were on their own, yes, but that meant, in a sense, that the real work was to begin then. And that was the work that they had to do together and without Jesus.

For they had to found a church or a religion or a faith and they had to do so amongst a very divided people. Remember that Jesus was a Jew; some of the disciples were Jews and some were gentiles. Of the people to whom the disciples needed to speak, some would be Jewish, some would be Roman, some would be of other backgrounds. Luke, who most likely wrote the book of Acts, knew of Paul, and would include his thoughts as he worked among the Jewish and gentile communities. So all this is not internal thought but external work of building community and expanding the church of the spirit, which Jesus had established, throughout the Roman Empire. And, as you will remember, the Roman Empire was not one state but a union of disparate peoples.

Now, as some of you might realize, we do have a few little troubles with community once in a while here in our own time and place. In New Orleans, certainly a home of many disparate people and where I've been spending a lot of time in the past few years, a story has been emerging that I thought worthwhile telling you about. After the killings at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, in 2015, many cities, counties and states scurried to remove the remnants of their confederate past. In New Orleans, there was a lot of heated discussion about the possible removal of statues of 3 confederate generals and of a white supremacist group from 1875. People talked about it at dinner parties, at swimming pools, at historical lectures, and in jazz clubs.

Politicians mentioned it in their speeches. If you wanted to keep the statues, you said it was for historic preservation; if you were against it, well, why honor the beast?

Finally a bill was passed to take down the statues and people talked about it even more; some people got really mad.

Last month they started taking them down, the least well known ones first, and in the dark of night, with the workmen wearing masks. Even so, large numbers of folks gathered, some of them yelling, some of them singing. It takes a long time to take a statue down and the mayhem was raucous. The first to come down was the one of the Crescent City White League, a white supremacist group from reconstruction days; then about a week later came Jefferson Davis; then General Beauregard. They all came down in the night with lots of shouting and yelling and carrying on.

The last statue scheduled was that of Robert E. Lee. He was on a 60 foot marble column in the middle of a busy downtown traffic circle. But he was taken down in the middle of the day - starting in the morning - not with a lot of anger, but with peaceful, celebrating crowds. At the end of the removal, at 6 pm, the mayor made a speech in which he said, among many other things, "We are better together than we are apart. We forget, we deny how much we really depend on each other, how much we really need each other." "Instead of revering a 4-year brief historical aberration that was called the Confederacy we can celebrate all 300 years of our rich, diverse history as a place named New Orleans and set the tone for the next 300 years." "So now is the time to come together and heal and focus on our larger task. Not only building new symbols, but making this city a beautiful manifestation of what is possible and what we as a people can become."

So what does this story of New Orleans have to do with the ascension of Jesus? It's just that we can take the learning from the ascension either inwards or outwards - inwards towards our own soul and spirit or outwards towards the community and how we might join with it. The disciples and followers might surely have meditated upon their teacher's insights, become monks or hermits, and we would, perhaps have had a quite

different world. But they did not- they gathered those around them, often of different faiths, and they travelled about with the beginnings of what became the Christian church. Though they travelled far apart they kept their motivations together, holding onto what they felt they had learned and undergone as representing the mainstay of their community. Though Jesus' resurrection and ascension was a victory of the spirit, it meant also that the hard work on earth was now beginning. They had their mission; now it was time to make it manifest.

For New Orleans, those statues represented the order of the past when people were divided by the Civil War, by the color of their skin, by the class they belonged to. That war lasted only 4 years and has been over more than 150 years; yet and still the power of its separation has been enormous despite the evident need to bring people together in all manner of ways.

How it was that the removal of this last statue, the most prominent of all and in the clear light of day, happened with no violence is a mystery, but maybe it is just because everybody could see what was going on. Mayor Landrieu's eloquence added to the splendor of the moment and made it something to be treasured nationwide. That this city could move on and focus on becoming one...

As we said before, that lofty sense of spirit is intoxicating, and we will never want to give it up. Jesus rises up and we will want to follow him at least with our eyes and our hearts. But the hard work is building stuff here below, whether it is cities coming together or churches just beginning or any number of things.

Right here at the Beaverkill Church we have a mission that I would like to draw your attention to as our season opens. We have a marvelously beautiful old building, one that we have been working together to preserve as long as we have been worshipping here. Now our roof is in trouble and together we are going to have to raise the money to put on a new one at the end of the summer. That is our job, that is what we must come together to do, for our church, for our community. So I hope that you will join

me right now in starting to make that possible, by giving a bit more than you might otherwise have done in the offering this morning.

Thank you, and God bless you.