

Wrong Questions

This past Thursday is named Ascension of the Lord day on our liturgical calendar. Although all of our creeds and confessions lift this event for us as fundamental to our understanding of God and God's work with humanity, since it occurs during the week, we often don't pay much attention to it during our Sunday worship services. On this final day of the Easter period while we wait to officially celebrate the coming of the Advocate promised to disciples by Jesus, our scripture readings are split between the closing of the farewell address by Jesus in John's gospel and the recording of the disciples' reaction to Jesus actually bidding them that final farewell as he ascended upward out of their sight. Both texts describe the risen Jesus' continuing effort to direct the disciples for their future work. The gospel narratives all reveal that Jesus spent much time in prayer, usually going off to be alone, speaking with the One he named Father. As he ends this farewell discourse he does so with a prayer that is given for and in the presence of those he has chosen to go with him and learn from him while he proclaims the nearness of God's kingdom so they can continue this mission. This means they hear what he is proclaiming about his mission and their part in it. Jesus is intensely aware that the time for preparation is coming to an end saying "the hour has come." Not sure that the disciples would have believed that the glorification Jesus expects to come would be accomplished by betrayal, abandonment, crucifixion and death before the resurrection would mark the triumph of God's plan for redemption even if they understood what would occur over the next few days. In the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death, they were in despair and huddled together in fear. The gospel accounts all agree that the risen Jesus came to them to offer comfort and hope very soon after the resurrection, although we have two different accounts how the coming of the Advocate into occurred, there is no difference in what that coming meant for the future of the disciples activities. The prayer with which Jesus ends their preparation serves as a final teaching for them and us. Jesus reveals that God has chosen them to learn from Jesus while he was with them but now he wishes for God to continue working with them because as he was sent with a message, he is now sending them out with the same message. This message about God's reign and presence is very different from that of the world in which they will live, so Jesus asks for God's intercession on their behalf. Jesus envisions their future may be difficult because of the differences living as a citizen of God's reign while still in this world, so he seeks God's protection for them. This prayer asking for intervention is not just for those currently in the room, but for all those who will receive and accept the message they will carry out into the world after the resurrection. The hallmark of much of what Jesus has done throughout his ministry is the restoration and creation of community based on love and compassion. This prayer asks that the creation of loving community be evident in those who come after him phrasing it this way: "protect them in you name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Jesus seeks for those who follow him do so in love which sees others as bearing God's image and therefore a part of the same intimate relationship present within the Godhead. The traditions we have received reveal that the risen Christ spent time with the disciples before he ascended to rejoin the Father...that amount of time according to John's gospel was a busy forty days...which the disciples received more signs confirming Christ's identity and their mission in the world. The Ascension is described by Matthew where Jesus' parting words are known as the Great Commission. The other description of the Ascension is

found in the first chapter of Acts which we read this morning. Somehow this is not a flattering description of the disciples' reaction to this event. On this last time they are in the presence of the risen Christ they use this opportunity to ask a question focused less on their future work and more on their continued desire for the restoration of the nation state of Israel. Acts 1:6— "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' It seems that these men are anticipating a very different future for themselves where the fate of Israel will be to assume the role of an independent nation freed from the dominion of Rome. They view the power which God has illustrated with Jesus' life and ministry and then completed through his resurrection are seen as signs that God's intervention is for Israel, not for the whole world and all people. Jesus' response here is similar to one he gave to this same type of question in Matthew's gospel: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." Instead of being concerned about that Jesus again declares that they now are to soon begin the work of continuing his ministry to restore the world into a place where God's ways and vision become the world's way. Just before the ascension Jesus tells them to go back into Jerusalem and wait a few more days until the Holy Spirit will come to them and give them power so that they can take up the task to be his witnesses...not only in Jerusalem, but in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." This declaration does not list the details of the task as does the Great Commission found in Matthew, but nevertheless makes it clear this is not to be a small effort...they are to witness to what Jesus has told them in every known place. But training time, however confusing it has been to them is now over. This is shown clearly because after he said this they were watching as he was lifted up and disappeared out of their sight. They seemed to be so fascinated by his disappearance that continued looking upward even though he was no longer in sight. So again, when disciples seemed to have difficulty with their seeing, as in the opened grave, two men in white robes appear to ask them why they are still standing there looking upward. "They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?' as a reminder they now have a task to continue for Jesus. They are also given the information that at some future unnamed time, Jesus will return but in the meantime they are to return to Jerusalem and wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit to empower them. The disciples do remain together and return to Jerusalem and the room there where they were staying. This time of waiting was spent in prayer, and although the text does not give the focus of their prayers, as with all of us they were probably seeking guidance and the answer to their questions...which should now be focused toward how they were to become the bearers of the good news of God's intervention in history through Jesus. When Jesus lifted that prayer for them he sought intercession for their future. Earlier in the discourse he had told them to go to the Father and ask for their needs and it would be supplied. The question they asked just before Jesus ascended was the wrong question for those preparing to go into the world as witnesses to God's love and provision. The way the question was asked reveals they already had an answer in mind. Clearly the answer they received was not what they desired to hear. But the exchange is revealing for us, not only about the state of their understanding of God's plans for them and the world, but also how often we do the same thing. We often lift our prayers focused on what we desire not on seeking to understand what we truly need from our Lord. Many times our most heartfelt prayers must resemble more a "to do" list or a "what I want" list than one seeking to be guided into living as a more faithful citizen of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed near. That kingdom comes

near when we seek to form a closer relationship with the Advocate who comes to dwell within to teach, to heal, to comfort, to guide and provide for those things that keep us on the path leading to the healing and redemption of all those that God so loves. It is the closeness of that relationship that enables us to adopt that final commandment of Jesus to love as he loves. That relationship keeps us from asking the wrong question. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.