

Sermon

Participatory Enlightenment

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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My daughter has a little dog, named...well, she has lots of names...Zoe, Miss Baby, Miss Bunn because of the way she sleeps in a ball, and just mees. She's been with us for 10 years and is my daughter's constant companion. When Katie leaves for work, Miss Bunn sits on the couch, looking out the window for about 9 hours until Katie returns. This gaze of love and expectation that Katie will return is not so different than the apostles who gazed as Jesus ascended. Now the apostles had many days of warning – Jesus prepared them well for this but it didn't stop them from hanging on for that last moment before He truly disappeared. And they swiftly went about their business spending most of their time, like Miss Bunn, waiting for Jesus return. This is essentially important but it is not what Jesus prepared them or us for.

Some of us get lots of warning when someone is going to depart from our lives. A lengthy illness, perhaps an advanced age, but it doesn't seem to help much. That moment is about as much pain as we experience in this life.

Letting go of something we love, something we are comfortable with or have even come to rely on whether we know it or not, is very hard – but it is very much a normal part of life both for us as individuals and as a community. What the ascension is truly is is a moment of transformation and transition. The disciples focus is moved from the second member of the trinity, Jesus, to the third, the Holy Spirit. The absence of the earthly Jesus leads us to search for a

God who is nevertheless present in the world. The two messengers in the text ask the disciples – Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Implying the need to move ahead in the practice of ministry. They don't comfort their loss but urge them ahead to active engagement in the new era. In this moment, the disciples had to relinquish some of their expectations. Moving forward with this faith, without the power of Jesus' miracles, God's right hand, then and now requires great boldness and great faith. The Spirit moves the apostles to visit unusual places and takes them in some rather unexpected directions. As a result of their constant witness, they are accused of "turning the world upside down." Hope we get accused of that too.

Our scripture from Ephesians sounds as if Paul is speaking directly to us today, doesn't it? At least, I hope it does. The words spoken here to the community of faith are one of confidence – blessed assurance that the community is capable of great things within the Christian life. The text stresses that this life we live is not of a single experience or a destination, but rather a journey that never ends. This process of enlightenment where our experiences, both good and bad, lead us to a stronger faith and fortitude to carry out the will of God.

"...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

Powerful words. The Christian life as expressed in this text is about being shaped and fashioned over time. There is a participatory, communal element that enlightens us. Not knowledge that is gained by study, it is learned by living among other believers, doing God's work together. It is a faith that leads us to new insight revealing nuances of the world that otherwise would be impossible to grasp.

This is a belief that even in the darkest moments, even when a life seems too far gone to save, even when the world is filled with hate and anger, we know that as a faith community we can make a difference and lead the world, as we are led by the Holy Spirit, to a life of love through Christ. We can't help it because through our faith journey, our hearts have been changed and we just don't see the world that way. We know that our God can redeem, we know that our God can transform and remake us into something new. God does not see outward appearances but sees our hearts – and this vision is available to all of us.

“Christians are going to be a nuisance in any imaginable human society.”
(United Methodist Pastor Bill-Wylie Kellerman) We are never going to rest when evil is winning, seeking political or material power. We are too wise and have been evolved through our faith journeys together to be distracted by false Gods like that. The writer of Ephesians speaks of power in a fundamentally different way, understanding it as a spiritual reality that raises the dead and has dominion both within and without time. This is power far beyond the political. We spend our lives and our time developing the eyes of our hearts rather than our portfolio. We spend our energy praying with those who suffer and seeking justice for those who are oppressed.

Being a Christian makes it near impossible for us to feel hopeless or helpless. We feel and know the power of the Holy Spirit is among us and that God uses this power to transform the world through the love he has placed in our hearts. Like Miss Bunn, we can sit and wait for something good to happen, or we can go make good. The choice is ours – we have been given full access to this power. Through our work we evolve through participatory enlightenment...a journey that leads us in all kinds of directions. And we know and believe, that nothing is left unredeemed by God. May we be the change we wish to see in the world.

Amen.