

## **Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**May 24, 2009**

Easter 7B 2009

In the Name of our One ever living, ever loving God:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, today is the seventh and last Sunday of Easter. I don't know about you, but today's lessons make me wonder if the lectionary editors were running out of steam. In today's Gospel lesson from John, we eavesdrop along with the eleven as Jesus prays for them at the end of his discourse during the Last Supper. We get to listen to Jesus' private conversation with the Father before he leaves for the Garden and his arrest.

John is very dualistic. Unlike the Gnostics who viewed the spiritual and temporal as separate realms with all good residing in the spiritual realm and the physical temporal world being entirely base and evil, John believes that God truly does love the world and his goodness is to be found in the created material world. After all, Jesus was sent to redeem the world and bring everlasting life to those who abide in him. But that notwithstanding, the "world" for John is a pretty miserable place. It might help to understand John's point of view better if we replace John's term "the World" with our modern use of the term "the System". The goodness of the Creator is in the world, but evil and human behavior have transformed the world as God wants it to be into "the System" where injustice and venality seem to triumph and rule.

Jesus knows his earthly ministry will shortly end and that he must now send his beloved and closest friends into "the System" to complete his ministry of redemption and transformation. Jesus knows that this is not going to be easy and Jesus now prays for the

Father's protection of his disciples. It is a very intimate prayer and we can see the depth of Jesus' love for those who abide in him.

But why are we reading this lesson on the last Sunday of Easter. Wouldn't it fit better on Maundy Thursday? The confusion grows when we consider our first reading from the book of Acts. This Thursday we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension and our reading from Acts takes us into the life of the eleven following that event. All of this has got me wondering where in the world are we? I think we are in "in between times" and should really call this Sunday 'Ascension Sunday' so that's what I am going to do.

I think we have to do some serious thinking about the Ascension and about biblical literalism. I think we have to bring Galileo into our readings to clear some thing up. Our knowledge of the world – of Creation – must inform us about our Creator. I don't know why it is that new knowledge can change or even supplant old knowledge in every field except religion! Our knowledge of the cosmos and of human nature has got to inform our understanding of the nature of God. That's why I am going to bring Galileo into our celebration of the Assumption. In Jesus' time and for sixteen centuries after that people believed the heavens revolved around the earth and many believed that the earth was flat. Some still do. This world view is like a three decker house: we are on the main floor, heaven is upstairs and Sheol or hell is downstairs. It therefore made sense for Luke to have Jesus ascending up into the sky. However Galileo added his mathematical expertise to his astronomical observations and demonstrated that the heavens did not revolve around the earth. In short, there is no "up" or "down".

That is not to challenge the great truth of the Ascension and what it means for us. We are always learning and need to apply this knowledge when reading Scripture. Given our knowledge of physics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century maybe we would state the truth of the Ascension in different imagery - as Jesus being freed from the limitations of time and

space. Jesus is now both gone and not gone and the eleven are trying to see what's next.

In today's lesson from Acts we see them gathered in the upper room praying and Peter stands up and addresses the 120 followers (it must have been a large room) to say that a successor to Judas needed to be elected. The successor must be someone who was with them during Jesus' entire earthly ministry and was witness to the Resurrection. (An historical aside: 120 was considered the minimum number for a Jewish community or congregation to organize itself and there was traditionally elected one elder for each 10 members). Following tradition election was by lots with the candidates names being put into a tumbler and the winner drawn out thus indicating God's will. Two names were put in (Matthias and Joseph called Barsabbas) and Matthias was chosen. Neither was ever referred to before and neither is ever heard from again in the New Testament.

Following the culture, only men's names were put in the tumbler. Rather than these two men no one has ever heard of, I wonder if Mary Magdalene or one of the other women who fit the criteria wouldn't have made better candidates! After all, they did not cut and run from the cross and they were the first to whom the risen Christ appeared. Perhaps Peter could have given God **all** the eligible candidates to choose from. But his culture got in his way and he didn't. ***It seems God can only work with what we are willing to give God!*** It took us until 1989 for Barbara Harris to be elected the first woman Bishop in Apostolic Succession and some are still working on it or still actively opposing it.

What we are seeing in this early community is an organization in formation but one still without a vision or a mission. It is not the Church yet. We will have to wait until next Sunday to see the life giving Spirit enter the community's life.

I think this state of affairs is a good thing to think about. Church isn't about us but is about mission – to continue the earthly ministry of Jesus to transcend and transform

“the System” into the just place of justice and peace that God intends. If that vision is not paramount to us, we are not the Church of God but rather an organization, another affinity group. Lately, it seems that the Church in the broadest sense of that term has become self-involved and preoccupied by organizational matters. If we turn our eyes and hearts to the reality of the world and the need for transformation and reconciliation, I think we’d see the need for us all to be allowed to be stewards of God’s Spirit in the world.

In last week’s lessons we saw how God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles to the amazement (and perhaps disapproval) of the leaders in Jerusalem. It seems that the Church appreciates that God pours out the Holy Spirit where God will, but like Peter is still bound by its culture and is still incapable of putting *all* the names into the tumbler. God can only work with what we are willing to give God. It seems we are still in the “in between times.”

Amen.