

Pastor Gail Duba
Easter 7B

In the Space In-Between

May 16, 2021
John 17:6-19

Today the Church gathers around the world in the “space between.” Just last Thursday, the Church celebrated the Feast of the Ascension. Today the church finds itself on the threshold of something new. But it isn’t quite here yet. We are invited on this Seventh Sunday of Easter to enter a period of waiting once more. But this period of waiting is a bit different; it’s the pause between the hope of the past and the hope for the future. It is sometimes hard to hold this space because we’re so eager to move on and find new direction. It is possible to treat this day as a preemptive Pentecost, but to do so misses one of the most important lessons of life. It is the in-between that invites us to find depth and to hold the anxiety and fears of the future at bay and embrace this one moment.

If you’ve ever stood at the door of a significant change in your life and found yourself anxious and waiting, longing for an answer or a direction in your life, you’ve experienced what psychologists and anthropologists call liminal space. Richard Rohr, Christian author of 20+ books, describes liminal space this way: “It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run... anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.” It’s a very natural response to the uncertainty and ambiguity of this place. One finds oneself longing for the truth and structure of what was or of what will be. Uncertainty is not easy to live with.

In the uncertainty, Jesus did not run away from the liminal space between his ministry and his crucifixion. Instead, he enters into that space and he reflects on the current state of the unknown. Jesus provides us with some idea of how to properly inhabit the space in-between the answers. Inhabiting the space in-between the answers is hard, but it is also most formative. Learning to live with the paradoxes of life and faith takes spiritual maturity. This Gospel text can be a confusing one for most of us to read. It was only after considering that this text is a struggle in the space in-between that this passage might begin to make sense. Jesus seems to be looking back at his time with his disciples and his work in the world in certain places in the passage; in others, he speaks of his reunification with our Creator in heaven and receiving once again the glory that was his from beyond time. Jesus’ discourse gives us this beautiful proclamation of his relationship with God the Creator, with his disciples & with the whole world.

Jesus speaks about his relationship with God and how he has proclaimed God's word to the whole world. At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus says, "Since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Jesus goes on to discuss his mission and ministry in the world. Jesus talks about the way that he has proclaimed God's word to those whom God has given to him. It does raise the question of whether he's speaking just about his ministry to the disciples or to the whole world. There's no real answer to that question in keeping with the paradox of liminal space—it is simply a question to which the answer may well be "both/and" as opposed to "either/or."

Then Jesus bids us embrace yet another paradox as he proclaims God's provision. The Word has come, that is, Jesus has come. The world has hated those who received Jesus because they do not belong to the world. But it's worth asking the question: can one belong to both this world and the next? It seems a strange thing to suggest that those who belong to Jesus are citizens of both heaven and earth, and yet this is in keeping with the Gospel message, too. Nicodemus once came to Jesus seeking to understand the kingdom of God. Jesus explained that in order to see the kingdom, one must be born again. It left Nicodemus perplexed. He was so perplexed that he asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" It is a paradox in which we're called to live.

We live in the already and the not-yet of God's kingdom. At the end of this passage, Jesus begins to talk about the need to be sanctified. Sanctified is simply a word that means to be set apart. It is in the already and the not-yet of God's kingdom that Jesus asks that we be set apart for God's work in the world just as he has already set himself apart and is about to set himself apart through the cross. Jesus says, "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."

This Gospel passage calls us to set ourselves apart for God's purposes in the world. We hear that setting apart in our baptismal rites as we join a new family with an amazing responsibility. The purpose of the Gospel message is not that we would withdraw from society in order to be set apart, but that in living our lives faithful and true to the Good News, we would speak truth, create justice, and offer mercy. We who hear the words of the Gospel remember the message that God has given throughout history: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It is a simple profundity that the prophet offers. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. This is the example that Jesus sets for us in his life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus and his disciples continue to emphasize the importance of witnessing, but not just any witness or any story, but we are called to witness to the witness of the truth of the resurrection, and Jesus' continuing presence in the world and in our lives in the form of the Holy Spirit.

Next week, we will celebrate Pentecost, the biggest Christian event besides the resurrection. Jesus' disciples are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, animated into action as witnesses to go out and tell everyone possible about the truth of the resurrection and God's act of redemption open to all people. The disciples are given the task of calling for repentance with the gift of redemption, and they will "prove" God's power to grant this kind of redemption by continuing with Jesus' miracles, of healing, preaching, teaching, and transforming people's lives.

Today, we continue to ask Lord Jesus to send his Holy Spirit power among us, to empower us, to clothe us with God's gifts of healing and teaching, so that we too can continue to witness to God's ongoing redemption.

Those who invite the Holy Spirit to fill them and use them, prepare yourselves in prayer and in petition. Today, more than ever, we need eager and available witnesses, who are animated through the power of the Spirit to relay that truth to others, to verify the truth of the gospel in real time through continued acts of healing, miracles of transformation, and continued proclamation.

This requires true trust in the witnesses that came before, true belief in the veracity of the disciples' claims, and true faith in the still energizing power of the Holy Spirit, which dwells not just in the past, but in the present, and in your future.

Today, I challenge you to faith. True faith. And to witness. For this is who we are. We have a role not only in the here and now, but in what being a Christian will mean in your future and in the future of the world. As we invite Jesus to be with us this day and every day, let us allow ourselves to be in the liminal space, the space between the past and the not yet realized future, let us embrace the love of God. For with God's love all things are possible, "For those who love the Lord and those who are called according to God's purposes." Amen