

Sunday, May 16, 2021
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year B)

Acts 1.15-17, 21-26; John 17.6-19

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorylongbeach/videos/472549730507410>

(Sermon begins at about 23:55)

“Re-Boot”

Once again, the lectionary for today provides a wonderful backdrop for what is going on in the life of the contemporary church. Specifically, what is going on here at St. Gregory’s. Today our parish makes the shift from solely doing online worship as we have been for the last 14 months, to reopening to in-person worship. To be more accurate, we are shifting to hybrid worship—combining elements of in-person worship with online worship to provide a broader, more accessible worship experience for all. In short, we are in transition.

At its core, this is what we see going on in our readings for today—in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles and in the selection from the Gospel according to John. Both readings deal with a shift, or an impending shift, in the way the early church would function. And even though the nature of the transition was very different from what we are dealing with, both these readings have something to offer us, to help as we move forward.

Our Gospel reading for today is a continuation of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, portions of which we have heard over the last couple of weeks. The Farewell Discourse being Jesus’ final words to his disciples on Maundy Thursday, before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus knows what is going to happen to him, so is preparing his disciples for his departure. These are his final instructions to them. His last shot at providing them with what they will need to carry on with the work that he had been doing for the last three years. The portion we hear today is the bulk of what is often referred to as his high priestly prayer—the last words of his Farewell Discourse. This high priestly prayer highlights the unity of God, Jesus, and the believing community. It is a prayer for the disciples who will be carrying on his work, as well as a prayer for the ongoing work of the community in the world. Essentially a prayer for the early church and its success. It is also an important statement about the place of the believing community in the world.

We don’t get the whole prayer in today’s reading. But what we do hear is the heart of Jesus’ message, focusing on the distinction between “the world” and the disciples. Of the disciples, Jesus prays, “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world” (Jn 17.16). Jesus does not belong to the world by virtue of his unique nature, his being the Son of God. Similarly, the disciples are not considered to belong to the world because of who they are as Jesus’ followers. The ways of the world do not define who they are. By virtue of being called into God’s service, by virtue of being called to follow Jesus, they are called into a new way of living, a new way of being. While Jesus does not go into detail, he is essentially saying that as followers of Christ, they follow a different law that is sometimes at odds with the ways of the world. Their supreme law is not secular authority. Their supreme law is not even the Jewish laws which they grew up following. Their law is far more expansive, far more demanding: to

love God and to love others. And to do so in a radical way. Even when doing so goes against social convention or political ideology. Even when doing so means having to set one's own self-interests aside.

In this prayer, Jesus prays that God will continue to protect his followers as they continue the oftentimes difficult work of living the Gospel. Recognizing that there is still so much work to do, Jesus does not pray that God take them out of the world. What good would that do, to be separated from the world? Because the work that needs to be done is very much in the world. Not within the safe confines of the community of faith, within the church. Jesus recognizes that for his followers to be effective in their ministry, they still need to be in the world. And at the same time, to find means of sustaining and nurturing themselves in the midst of their ministry in the world. This means that they will need to rely on one another for support. To this end, Jesus prays that "they may be one" as he and the Father are one (Jn 17.11b).

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles also speaks to transition within the community of faith while seeking to maintain unity—that the early church might find ways to continually be one even as it expands. In fact, the entire book of Acts is about transition. About the growth and development of the early church in the first three decades after Jesus' Ascension. The portion we hear today takes place just a matter of weeks after Jesus' delivery of his Farewell Discourse and the high priestly prayer. In the part of Acts we hear today, the disciples are seeking to fill a leadership gap. As you recall, there were originally 12 disciples who were Jesus' righthand men. With the death of Judas Iscariot following his betrayal of Jesus, they were down to 11. Since the 12 tribes of Israel were central to Jewish history, the disciples thought they needed to maintain the symbolism of 12 leaders. As we hear today, the 11 laid out a process for filling the gap. The primary criteria being someone who had been with them throughout Jesus' public ministry and who had been a witness to his Resurrection. Men need only apply. As we heard, there were two candidates: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. They decided—or rather, God decided—using the ancient method of casting lots. And the lot fell on Matthias. Although, this is the last recorded incident of the early church seeking to maintain a leadership team of 12. As the church grew and spread, it quickly became apparent that this old model would not be the best or most efficient way to oversee and guide the church for a variety of reasons.

While not part of the reading, the implicit message of today's passage from Acts lays the groundwork and points to the fact that the early church, out of necessity, needed to find new ways of being church. "We've always done it that way" just would not work with the changes that were taking place. The church was rapidly expanding to the far reaches of the Roman Empire and beyond. A geographic area that a leadership team of 12 could not possibly hope to administer. And the expansion was not just geographic. Gentiles were being converted and added to their number. People who had no foundation in the Jewish faith that was the original religion of Jesus and his apostles. Which raised a whole other set of questions about who could be members of this new religion, what were the requirements for membership, and so on. This growth also meant that they would be incorporating people who had vastly different cultural backgrounds. The old way of guiding a localized church of Jewish converts to the new Christian faith just would not work for a religion that was rapidly growing and extending into the far reaches of the known world. The fact that we still exist as a world religion indicates that the

church did adapt to meet the ever-changing needs of the increasingly diverse community of faith.

These two readings—Jesus’ high priestly prayer for his disciples as they prepared to take up the mantle of leading the church, and their early attempts at living into the prayer Jesus had for them—taken together contain an important message as we face a transition of our own. As we come back together for in-person worship. As we expand the way we do worship moving forward. As we expand the way we do ministry moving forward. Recognizing that even in the joy of us being back in this space, that our community of faith is not the same as when we left here 14 months ago. Recognizing that our community, more than before, transcends the confines of these four walls. All those present for in-person worship are obviously excited to be back together. But there is still a large portion of our parish family who are not here with us today. At least not physically. There are many of our number who just are not ready to return to in-person worship. Who are not comfortable doing so. And we respect that. In addition, there are some who just are not able to be with us. Those who are “shut in” and unable to come, no matter how much they may want to.

As the way we do church changes and evolves, shifting from solely online to a more hybrid model, we need to remember that our community extends beyond those whom we see in this sanctuary on Sunday. In the Before Time, there was always the danger of being segregated into “different congregations”— 8:00 and 10:15. The risk is even greater now. The 8:00 community, when we start that back up. The 10:15 community. And now we have an expanded, virtual community. There is a far broader community that is St. Gregory’s out there. Some of whom we may never see, because that community now extends into Northern California, the Inland Empire, and even across the country. But these are just as much a part of our congregation as those sitting in this room. They are just as valuable, just as integral to our life and ministry. Not just because some of them are actually pledging members, but because they have made the conscious choice that they want to be part of us, even if they do not live close by. That says something about who we are and what we have to offer. In all we do moving forward, we need to continually remember that.

We need to remember the lesson from Jesus’ high priestly prayer: that we are one. We need to remember the lesson from the early church in the Acts of the Apostles: that the way things were done before may not be the best or most efficient way to deal with the direction the church is going. So, moving forward we may have to do things a little differently. Things may not be like what we knew before. So that we can be sure that all know and feel that they are part of the one congregation of St. Gregory’s. This applies not just to what our worship looks like. We will also, out of necessity, need to take a critical look at all areas of parish life, at all our ministries, and discern what those might look like as we move forward. Are particular ministries still relevant or needed? How might some ministries need to change? Will new ministries need to be added to meet the growing and changing needs of the new and improved St. Gregory’s? All of these are questions that we will be looking at over the coming months. Questions we will be addressing together, as one community of faith.

I know for a lot of people, the thought of change is scary. They want things to be the way they have always been. But our 2,000-year history shows us that the institutional church has

continually changed and adapted to meet the ever-changing needs of the world. And to meet the ever-changing needs of the local context. The church in those early days after Jesus' departure looks nothing like how it did before the pandemic started. And our leaders, from the Presiding Bishop to our own Bishops, have said that, out of necessity, the post-pandemic church will look and operate differently than it did before. This is what Jesus anticipated as he was preparing to leave his disciples. He knew he had prepared them well, and that with God's help, they would succeed, that they would thrive. And they did. I know in my heart of hearts that we too have prepared well and that, with God's help, we will succeed, that we will thrive.

We are faced with an exciting opportunity. As our world slowly begins to recover from the pandemic, we have a choice. We can go back to the way things were in the Before Time. Or we can take this opportunity to assess what we have learned in the last 14 months and to re-boot: to reshape the church, to reshape St. Gregory's, to be stronger, to be more vibrant, to be more resilient, to be more responsive to the needs of the world around us. I invite you to join me as we begin this exciting work together. The work of becoming the church that God is calling us to be in the post-pandemic world.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!