

“MAKING SPACE FOR THE SPIRIT”

John 14:15-19, 25-27; Acts 1:1-17, 20-26

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This is a text we usually read on Ascension Sunday, several weeks after Easter and the week before Pentecost... but sometimes it's really worthwhile to read a Bible story "out of season," so to speak. We hear it a bit differently in a different context.

This first chapter of Acts is a bridge between the first part of Luke's story (in the gospel that bears his name) and the second part, which we call "The Acts of the Apostles," although I've never been convinced that's the best name for this book. You can decide what you think about that, since we'll be spending some time with this book over the next several weeks.

Anyway, today's story from this first chapter is more than a narrative bridge; it's a story about a time of transition: Jesus' followers are in transition from a life with his physical presence – a time when they could touch him and hear his words and witness his healing actions – to a very different reality without any of those readily perceived supports.

Will they still follow Jesus?
Will they know what to do?
Will their community endure?
Will they be able to feel the presence of God?

Jesus says goodbye, gives them a brief charge, and vanishes... but he has promised to send them God's Holy Spirit to lead them "into all truth."

And then there's a kind of lull in the action, until they receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which we know is going to happen because we celebrate that every year as Pentecost, which we think of as the "birthday of the church."

But we don't generally pay a lot of attention to the fact that there is a bit of "down time" in the story. The Spirit doesn't come rushing in as Jesus is ascending. In fact, it's at least several days... with no indication of exactly how long it's going to be until the disciples experience that promised power.

Why is that, I wondered? For sure a part of the reason is to make it abundantly clear that the church – that's what the book of Acts is about, the birth and growth of the church – doesn't exist because of human actions but because of the Spirit of God. The disciples didn't come together, form communities, reach out to their neighbors, send

out missionaries, connect people with Jesus, and eventually become the church – a mighty force in the world - because some people had great organizational skill, superior marketing know-how, or well-developed theological thinking. None of this happened, either, because of the compassion and charisma of some Christians or the drive of others to spread Christianity by force if necessary. No, the church is formed and sustained *by God's Spirit*. Luke wants to be sure we understand that.

But he also wants us to know that the disciples are not passive puppets here, and this is not empty “nothing” time. Somehow, this time is readying Jesus’ friends for what is next. It is allowing them to let go of “the way things were” and to make ready for what God will do next.

In this “in between” time, the disciples are making space for the Spirit.

They are waiting.
They are praying.
They are preparing.

You might think they would be tempted to give up, or become fixated on what *was*. But you only wait if you expect something to happen. And clearly, these people who had spent so much of the past few years with Jesus *did* expect that the new life Jesus had brought them into was going to continue, in some form. They had learned, I guess, to trust what Jesus told them. So they didn’t go their separate ways, back to their villages and fishing boats. They stayed together. They *waited*.

The disciples didn’t try to figure out this new reality themselves. They spent time praying. I wonder what their prayers consisted of. Begging God for help and protection? Seeking direction? Pouring out their fears? Thanking God for the time they had with Jesus, perhaps? Maybe they tried to stay grounded in their tradition with prayers from the Psalms. Whatever the specifics of their prayers, the fact that prayer was a natural and significant part of this unsettled time tells us a lot about them. In spite of a whole lot of uncertainty about their future, they didn’t fall into thinking that God had abandoned them. They stayed connected with God. They might not have known what was next but they understood that they belonged to God. So they *prayed*.

They also understood that they could expect to have a mission. There will be work to do. They aren’t expecting that when the Holy Spirit comes they will be sitting on their hands! They have learned, from being with Jesus, that they have a role to play. They realize they will be working, and that they will be working *together*. And it occurs to them that they have a “vacancy” in their ranks... so they seek out someone to fill the place of Judas. They don’t know when stuff is going to start happening, but they want to be ready. I don’t know if they did anything else to be ready, and I don’t know how much it mattered to have that one additional person in leadership. Maybe this was the only concrete action they could think of at the time. Maybe it matters most as a

symbolic gesture – something that represents the completeness of the leadership team: “yes, we are all here!” You sense in this decision a confidence that they will be called upon to act, to respond to whatever it is that God’s Spirit will lead them into. So they *prepared*.

In all of this, they are making ready; they are making space for the Spirit.

Making space for the working of God’s Spirit is ever and always an important movement for the people of Jesus’ church. We know that the health and strength – and the whole ministry – of the church – rests ultimately not in us but on the Spirit. The challenge is to be careful that our organization and all our hard work of ministry, our theology, our commitment to our worship practices and traditions doesn’t shut out the Spirit. We also need to actively “make space” for the Spirit.

I want us specifically to think about our stewardship – the way we use our time and energies and gifts and resources – as an effort to make space for the Spirit. It’s not just about paying the bills and getting the tasks done. It’s about the ways we invite God’s Spirit to work in and among and through us. It’s about how we make space for the Spirit to do new things, to touch people’s lives with grace, to teach us, to make the church stronger.

Our stewardship makes space for God’s Spirit to sing through our choir’s music, to speak to us through books and sermons and classes, to encourage us as we spend time together in small groups or at coffee plus. Our stewardship makes space for God’s Spirit to be there in every connection we make with someone who comes to the church for help, or worships with us on Christmas Eve, or visits the Art Festival. Our stewardship makes space for God’s Spirit to work as a pastor or deacon prays with a patient having surgery and in the ministry we provide when there is a death or crisis.

When we think about giving – about our commitment of resources (or our time and talents) I hope we may think of it in this way. It is actually a holy and wonderful, and deeply spiritual and faithful, thing. And I hope we may experience this stewardship season expectantly, prayerfully, and with a desire to be ready for what the Spirit will do in and among us in the coming year. Amen.