

May 24, 2009/Ascension Sunday/David L. Edwards

Waiting for the Spirit

Acts 1:14-17, 21-26 *All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer...*

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles for this Ascension Sunday may seem odd. It comes AFTER the ascension of Jesus. It is about what went on between the Ascension and Pentecost when God's spirit was poured out upon Jesus' community. I was interested in this. The disciples do two things in this in-between time: they pray together and they choose a replacement for Judas Iscariot. What is so interesting about that? Compared to Jesus' ascension and the pouring out of God's spirit, it seems pretty mundane stuff.

Just before our reading for today, Jesus tells the disciples that they "will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (1:4-5) He says that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. They will be his witnesses in Jerusalem and throughout the whole world. (1:6-8). Then Jesus is "lifted up" and is gone.

Here is an interesting part of THAT story. The disciples just stand there "gazing up toward heaven". Two men in white robes come up and ask them why they are still hanging around "looking up toward heaven." In other words, stop looking into heaven. Our place is on this earth. We are not supposed to linger on the spiritual heights, losing touch with the importance of our daily lives and how we live them. The disciples experienced the mystery of Jesus' resurrection and the wonder of his presence with them as the risen Christ. Now he is taken from them into heaven. You don't want it to end. You want to keep the spiritual "good vibrations" going.

Jack Kornfield has a book on Zen Buddhism with the wonderful title AFTER THE ECSTASY, THE LAUNDRY. We think the spiritual life is about floating above the earth and looking disdainfully at the mundane things of everyday life. We want "spiritual experiences" so that we can sustain that "spiritual feeling." Kornfield says that after you gain enlightenment, you do exactly the same things as before. The difference is that you do them with complete awareness and presence. You were sleepwalking through life; now you are wide awake. Before there was the mundane and the sacred; now the mundane becomes sacred. I think this story from the Acts is about the same thing. After the high points of Jesus' resurrection, his risen presence with his disciples, and his ascension, the disciples have to go back to Jerusalem and wait. We are not meant to live gazing into heaven, but on the earth. BUT, we live with a difference--as those who see things in a different way, who go about our living in a different way. We live with our feet on the ground and our hearts and minds open to God's spirit.

So they go back to Jerusalem to an upstairs room. There are the eleven disciples of the inner circle, some women who were closest to Jesus, Jesus' brothers, and quite a few others (v. 15). Judas Iscariot, of course, is no longer with them. They do two things.

First, they devote themselves constantly to prayer. Prayer becomes the basic work of the community. Prayer is keeping our hearts and minds and lives open to God. It is being by ourselves or together with quiet hearts and minds so that we can listen for what God wants to speak to us and where God's spirit may be leading us. The community of Jesus is not a society of smart folks with grand ideas for changing the world and having all the answers to life's biggest questions. The picture of the early Christian community is of a small group remembering Jesus' promise of God's spirit and waiting prayerfully for that spirit.

I think this confirms the importance of our continuing to work with our ability to be silent together and individually. If we are filling the air with our opinions and knowledge and big ideas, there is no room for God to work. If we are growing in our capacity to be at ease with silence and waiting, then we become increasingly receptive to God's informing and leading spirit. According to this story, prayer is the way we prepare ourselves and wait for God's spirit to lead us and guide us.

The second thing is that the disciples take care of business. They have a nominating committee meeting! Well, not exactly. Peter believes it is important to replace Judas Iscariot, completing the circle of the twelve. So he brings up the "elephant in the room"--the painful experience of Judas' betrayal of Jesus and his death. Now, there may have been intense feelings of betrayal or hurt or anger about Judas. Here was the opportunity to vent with each other about all of that, how terrible Judas was and how angry and hurt everyone felt. Either that did not happen or it was not reported. Instead, the community keeps the larger perspective of its life and work, what they are called to be and do. They propose two who had been around for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection--Joseph and Matthias. They pray for God's guidance, and then they cast lots, an ancient way of discerning God's will. We don't need to get hung up on that part, which may seem strange to us. The important thing is that they prayerfully go about keeping their vision and mission in awareness, and doing the things that need to be done. Matthias is chosen.

The community prayerfully went about its business. There were things that had to be taken care of. We sometimes think that being a spiritual community means being above doing the mundane things. Being on mission as a community, as persons and in mission groups, we may want to always be filled with a sense of high purpose, going from one great achievement to another. In mission groups, there is that initial sense of being called together for an exciting purpose. When the Festival Center mission began six years ago, those who felt called to it gathered with a feeling of excitement and anticipation. It was a bright and shining vision of a center for community in the central city where we could be in community with and service to those living in the College Hill/Fifth Street neighborhood. But soon we had to take care of business. How to pay the rent? How to get the place fixed up? What would be the structure of our meetings and the spiritual disciplines important to our life together and our mission? Who would clean up and take out the trash?

It is easy to see those things as "unspiritual". They are not very exciting. But that is the business to be taken care of. If a mission group cannot get focused on how to do its work, the mission remains only a bright and shining vision that never takes on flesh. There is also, of course, the risk of getting lost in the details, the work, forgetting the vision, the mission, the call. But when our work is done with our hearts and minds always open to the promise of God's spirit and the mission to which we have been called, the work to be done becomes sacred.

One evening I was reporting to Kaye my activities that day. I forget exactly what it was. Vacuuming the rooms of the retreat center, or raking leaves, or something like that. She laughed, reminding me how in previous churches I would have complained mightily about having to do such things. I realized that one of the great gifts of being here is knowing I am part of a community that tries its best to live prayerfully, open to God's leading, God's spirit. Sometimes things move very slowly at the Church of the Covenant. There is a lot of waiting, inner listening, speaking with each other about things having to do with our gifts and callings. And there is a lot to be done, many details to take care of even in a small community like ours. I realized that doing the things that need to be done is part of that larger life, being part of a community devoting itself to prayer, to inner listening, to watchful waiting, and then responding to the movements of God's spirit, often in directions we do not expect. That makes the most mundane tasks sacred and a source of joy.

In my college days, a friend tried to teach me to sail a boat. You have to do two things, almost at the same time. You have to pay attention to the wind, its direction and its shifting. The wind is the whole reason you are out there on the water. And you have to pay attention to the boat, the sails, the boom, the rudder, the various lines. You are always preparing for and responding to the wind. No wonder one of the most ancient symbols for the church is a ship. No wonder the most ancient image for God's spirit is the wind. That is a fine image for the spiritual life, as individuals and as a community. We pay attention to the wind, the spirit, and we pay attention to our lives. That's what it means to wait for God's spirit. It's not doing nothing. It's doing what needs to be done, prayerfully and with a sense of preparation and anticipation so that we can respond and follow.