

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, Jesus' last farewell to his followers. I have two early memories of saying goodbye. First one is when my father went to Boston when I was about 3-5 years old for a Simplex training event on school bell systems. I remember my mother telling us when we got home from the airport to look up into the air, maybe we would see the plane my father was flying in overhead. My other memory is of sitting at the kitchen table in our home in Maryland and as it rained during tropical storm Agnes. I was almost 4 years old. Afterward, my father went to Harrisburg to clean up my Great Grandparents' home on North Second Street. That time it was not an ascension into the sky in an airplane, but a northward descension into the muddy mess of a beloved home which from that time on would only be a memory in the family's mind. All I remember of the place is the wonderful sidewalks which were lifted up every so many feet by old tree roots. I did have a fascination with sidewalks and their joints as a child, remembered from the vantage point of a stroller. Funny how many memories are attached to goodbyes and the longer you think about it the more the memories come.

We have a few stories about Jesus' departure from his followers. It's not surprising they are recorded in the Gospels since they were, after all, goodbyes. Even John 17, a long prayer by Jesus tells us of his concern for his followers rather than himself at his coming death, another goodbye. In the stories of the ascension, the details are less important than what Jesus says. "You will be enabled by the Spirit to be witnesses of Jesus to all people." The stories of the ascension are not given to enable us to create shrines of memories or to tell us precisely where Jesus is right now, but they reveal what our mission is. Even the angels' message in Acts, "Why are you standing here staring into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go..." is a reminder that there is work to be done—a message to be proclaimed—lives to be lived even as our teacher and healer lived and died.

But the ascension is not our central message. Life is not about rising above it all and floating off to God somewhere. God is Spirit, and Spirit is so much beyond all of our thoughts about caring for our bodies and how long and how well we can stay alive.

No, the central message of the Gospel is the cross. So it's not about calculating efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and whether you are achieving your goals or not. It's not about securing a good future for ourselves or even our church, or our faith, or our nation. The cross was not a strategy for beating out the forces of evil where God wins and we win and we can avoid pain and suffering for the rest of time. The cross is about Jesus knowing he's about to die and being more concerned about his followers than his own suffering and death. The cross is about trusting in the life of God even beyond our own small existence. Knowing that there is profoundly much more to beauty and hope and peace than whether we are feeling those things as this moment in time. The cross is about being willing to lose, to die, to be humiliated for a just cause because one loves with a love that is stronger than death and hell.

Jesus is victorious and shows us the way because he was willing to lose for the sake of all that he loved. He didn't have to win. He didn't have to conquer. He didn't have to have an assurance that his game plan was going to be the winning one. He just knew that the Good news of the Kingdom of God is the only plan. Doesn't matter whether it works or not. Suffering love is true strength. Faithfulness. Not being right. Not being the strong one. Not being the top tribe.

Jesus put it all on the line for love. That's all that mattered for him. That is why he was granted

resurrection. That is why he ascended to the Father and why the Spirit comes at Pentecost. Jesus got it. He didn't force his way, he opened the way. He invited others to follow in the way. Only faithfulness to Mercy, Abiding Love, and God's reign of compassionate justice brings peace. This peace is known as we live the cross life. The way of suffering love. Not a suffering that runs from conflict or has no other choices, that is violence and abuse. Our crosses of suffering love come when we intentionally choose to love rather than retaliate, or insist on getting our own way, or defend our turf, or force our loved ones to follow the path we decide is right without any discussion.

Jesus is with us, not so much when we think of heaven and heavenly things, but when we make the tough choices and follow the difficult paths. When it hurts because we've done the right thing. The cross for Jesus was not about attaining celestial glory. It was about loving his friends and upholding faith for all, not just for the wealthy and powerful.

This week we complete our celebration of the resurrection. The joy of resurrection and ascension comes to those who submit to the discipline of the cross. We can't have it both ways. The cross is not a free ticket to heaven. The cross is a lifestyle to which Jesus invites us. It is demanding but brings untold joy and life for ourselves and all those around us. The more we practice the discipline of the cross, the more we know peace. We choose it in a moment but we have the rest of our lives to practice. God is merciful. God is love. The cross is proof. Let us continue our journey together. Thanks be to God.

Amen.