

‘Mind the Gap’

Easter 7B

John 17:6-19; Psalm 1

Rev. Dr. Laura Blazek
St. Michael’s Episcopal Church
Norman, OK
May 12, 2024

This Sunday, we find ourselves sandwiched between the feast days of Ascension and Pentecost. Ascension Day was last Thursday. It marks the fortieth day after the resurrection when Jesus Christ was lifted into the heavens as his disciples watched. “It is the final elevation of his human nature to divine glory and the near presence of God.” (The Episcopal Church) The feast of Pentecost literally means the fiftieth day and hence falls fifty days after the resurrection. On Pentecost we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples.

Therefore, there is this ten-day gap between the two events- between Jesus leaving the Earth and Holy Spirit coming down. Have you ever heard the phrase, “Mind the Gap”? It originated at the London Underground- what Americans call the subway. It is a warning phrase to take caution when crossing the empty space between the station platform and train doorway. The gap may be tiny or wide. It may require you to step up or down. Regardless, it is a reminder to pay attention to the missing area so that you don’t trip and fall.

This means that you must be fully present in the moment so that you are aware of your surroundings. If your mind is wandering off elsewhere or your eyes are on your cell phone rather than the world and people around you or you are in such a rush that nothing exists outside your needle-like focus, then you are likely to stumble as you are blind to what is missing. This is also true in life, particularly our Christian lives.

Our lives tend to fall into predictable patterns. We do things by rote, often oblivious to the shifting nature of the people and world around us. Sometimes even oblivious to the changing needs of ourselves until we hit the metaphorical brick wall, crumpling into a heap, unable to do much of anything. Do this. Go there. Dot your i’s and cross your t’s. We don’t leave room for the opportunity of discovery. In doing so, we miss seeing God at work within us and in the world around us. We miss hearing God calling to us. We miss sensing Jesus walking beside us, slinging a comforting arm over our shoulder. We lose awareness of the Holy Spirit guiding us in all that we do.

In our Gospel reading today we hear Jesus praying for the disciples at the end of a rather lengthy farewell discourse that began three chapters ago. In this discourse he gives them instructions as he tries to prepare them for when he will no longer be physically present, alluding to both his ascension and Pentecost. In John 16:1 he says, “I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling.” In other words, mind the gap. Pay attention. Be aware. Listen. Look. See what is

missing. There are challenges ahead and in choosing to follow me, to walk the way of love; you live a life in opposition to a world captivated by selfishness.

He ends his discourse with a prayer that the first disciples heard in real time, and we hear again today. If our lectionary reading went just another verse and a half longer, we would have heard Jesus pray, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” Jesus prays this prayer for us. How awesome is that!

This is a prayer born out of love. Jesus not only shows us how to walk the way of love when he was here on Earth, but he also prays that we will find and walk the same path. Jesus knows that the relationship between his disciples and the world is complicated, he prays for our protection on this path we walk. That our contentment is found in God’s words to love others as he loves us, rather than to live only for ourselves. He prays for our lives- that we will know the peace and love of God and that we will share this love with others so that they also might know the same.

The world in which we live is complex and isn’t quite as simple and dualistic as our Psalm and Epistle reading make it out to be. Righteous or wicked. Good or evil. Black or white. There are shades of gray.

Take for example the simple act of buying a shirt. This seems straightforward; however, what if that shirt was made in a sweatshop? What if the store I bought it from engages in unfair employment practices? What if I can’t afford to buy a different shirt or have no other place to buy one? Have I committed a sin in buying a particular shirt by being complicit in perpetuating an evil practice? Shades of gray. Life is messy and so is walking the way of love.

The gap between sacrificial love and selfishness can be narrow or wide. It can make us change the direction we thought we would have to go. And sometimes, despite our best efforts or even without realizing it, we stumble into the gap. We trip and fall. But Jesus is there to lift us up with grace and love. God puts people into our lives to help us navigate those gaps, to remind us that our transgressions are forgiven. We are in life together.

Jesus prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” This doesn’t mean we all have to be the same. It does mean that we are all working towards one common goal to build the Kingdom of God whose foundation is love. We are, as the Psalm says, “... like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season...”

Did you know that the estimated number of fruit bearing trees in the world is estimated in the tens of thousands? Apples alone have an estimated seven thousand five hundred different varieties and even the humble peach boasts two thousand different varieties. While each variety of fruit tree has its own unique needs to bear fruit in due season, they all require water to thrive and grow.

People are just like that. We have our own unique needs but to reach our full potential to be whom God created us to be we need the stream of ‘living water’ that is Jesus Christ. This living water brings us eternal life where we live with and for God in the here and now. It restores us,

quenches our souls parched for love and belonging, and it empowers us to spread the Good News of love and peace. It is through Christ that we all become one.

A beautiful example of becoming one but maintaining our individual variety and diversity was created by Syracuse University art professor Sam Van Aken. As an art project he created, the *Tree of 40 Fruit*. He created this tree by grafting together forty different heirloom and disappearing varieties of stone fruits including peaches, plums, and cherries.

Since that first tree in 2008, he has created eighteen more of these trees. It takes about nine years from the planting of the root tree until the grafted tree reaches maturity and begins to bear fruit. Much of the year it looks like a normal tree. But in spring, it blossoms with a variety of colors. As the season progresses it begins bearing forty different kinds of fruit each in its own time. You might find peaches one day and then nectarines or cherries a few days or weeks later. Professor Aken says, “I wanted to make this tree that would blossom in different colors and bear different types of fruit, so that when you’d happen upon it, it would cause this moment of rethinking that hopefully becomes the beginning of a story.”

Mind the gap. Rethink what is possible. Rethink where you are now and where you should be. Think about how the Holy Spirit is urging you to write your own story. Think about how Jesus Christ is calling all people to become one in his name and how he is calling you to walk the way of love as we build the Kingdom of God together.

In this space between Ascension Day and Pentecost I leave you with the final part of a Franciscan blessing:

May God bless you with enough foolishness
to believe that you can make a difference in this world,
so that you can do
what others claim cannot be done.

Amen

Bibliography

Aken, Sam Van. *Tree of 40 Fruit*. Syracuse University Campus, Syracuse, New York. fruit tree.

The Episcopal Church. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/ascension-of-christ-the-or-ascension-day/>. n.d.