Sermon for Sunday, May 13, 2018

MAKING AN IMPRESSION
Acts 1:1-11 / Ephesians 1:25-23

Today is *Ascension Day*, a bridge day in the liturgical calendar between the end of the Easter and the beginning of the Pentecost season. Whatever happened that day does not seem altogether self-evident. The *Book of Acts* records that Jesus was “lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” The *Gospel of Luke* says that Jesus withdrew from his disciples “and was carried up into heaven” (Lk. 24:51), but the phrase “being carried into heaven” is often missing in many ancient New Testament fragments and is probably a late addition to the text. So what was going on that day? What’s the scoop?

If you put this question to our third and fourth graders, as we did, they simply find this to be a really weird story. They are puzzled why Jesus apparently had to die a second time and scratch their heads as to where he actually went. I’ll let you all think about that one for a while. Our kids are terrific theologians. And I mean that in all sincerity.

One thing, however, seems to be clear in this rather strange event. The disciples are as clueless as ever as to what’s going on. “While he [Jesus] was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven’ (Acts 1:11).

This scenario reminds me of one of the great mysteries of life. Just the other day, I rode my bike and came upon a construction crew. There was one guy in a hole, digging for something, and four guys propping themselves up on shovels gazing into the very same hole. I had no idea what they were looking at. Having worked construction jobs during summer vacations way back when in high school in Germany, I can tell you that this phenomenon is universal. These same four guys have been looking into that same hole for a long time. Well, our ascension story strikes me as this universal construction phenomenon turned downside up. Here, the disciples don’t look down into a hole but up toward heaven while Jesus disappears into the wild blue yonder. Some of them probably had their mouths wide open, some probably shielded their eyes from the sun. In any event, one guy, Jesus, does all the work while everybody else just takes a break. The two men in white, angels perhaps, put an end to this. Just as the forewoman of the construction crew tells her workers, they tell the disciples: “Break’s over. Back to work!”

When looking at how the ascension is often depicted in art —you know I like art— Barbara Lundblad, the Joe R. Engle professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, noticed something peculiar. “Some artists painted or etched footprints on the ground not far from where the disciples were standing. Perhaps the artists have been imagining details that are not in the text. Or, perhaps, they keep pressing us with the question asked long ago: ‘Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’”
I think Barbara Lundblad is on to something profound. While the texts in the Book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke do not mention such footprints explicitly, the Epistle to the Ephesians does … in a manner of speaking. The writer addresses the congregation by praying that God would give them a spirit of wisdom “so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you [who are] the church, Christ’s body, the fullness of him who is all in all.”

Turns out, the impression, the footprint, with which Christ left us, is … us. Not only are we Christ’s body, but we are the “fullness of him who is all in all.” We are Christ’s impression, his footprints in the world. That is something it takes some time to digest. It is an important thing to think about before we engage in a bunch of ecclesiastical hoopla next week on Pentecost when God pours out God’s Spirit on the church.

No wonder, then, that the two men in white told the disciples to focus their attention where it now belonged: Not toward heaven, but with their eyes fixed firmly on the world. Our gaze is misdirected if it is perpetually fixed upward. What we need to do is to take a good look around. In looking around, we need to assess openly and honestly what kind of an impression it is that we are making as Christ’s church, as his body, here at Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church. Then, we need to question whether it is the kind of impression we want to make, or if we might want to change some things to make a different impression. And since we are about to celebrate our 75th anniversary come November, this is a fitting endeavor to engage in.

If the three young women—Brooke, Ellie, and Gigi—who spoke at our youth service a few weeks ago are any indication, and if we are listening to our young children is any indication, we are making a pretty good impression. What we have heard in the youth service and what we hear over and over again from our younger children is this: “The world wants to treat us as statistics, as numbers, but we know that we are beloved children of God, and that God knows us by name!” It actually gave me goose bumps when I heard them say this … publically, in worship! Would that we all knew that we indeed belong to God, regardless of our circumstances.

The next question we need to ask ourselves is what kind of impression we, as Christ’s body here at Ladue Chapel, are making in our community. Or, to phrase it differently, how would our community be different if Ladue Chapel disappeared from one day to the next? I have a hunch that some of those impressions are wonderful and life-giving, but other impressions can certainly be deepened. While we do exceedingly well in our mission work, and there are too many agencies to name them all, I have a hunch we could do better when it comes to race relations and interfaith relations in our city. In any event, our work as Christ’s body in the world will never be done on this side of the resurrection. Of that, I am certain.

We had the privilege of gazing at Jesus during Lent and our Easter season, and celebrate him today on Ascension Day. But with Pentecost already on the horizon, we are charged by the writer of Ephesians to keep our eyes focused on the ground and our feet planted firmly in this world, “so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us [who are] the church, Christ’s body, the fullness of him who is all in all.” And we are reminded by the two men in white who also come alongside us today: “Break’s over. Back to work!”

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, Ph.D.
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis MO
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