

“Listening Within”  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
The Rev. Rick Swenson - May 24, 2009

*Acts 1:15-17, 21-26*

*Psalm 1*

*1 John 5:9-13*

*John 17:6-19*

Easter -not just a day, a season.

As we draw to the end of Easter there are a lot of things happening. In our lectionary we have been reading these past few weeks about the Last Super and Jesus’ final discourse and prayers with the disciples before the momentous events of the final days of his earthly life. In our Church calendar we look forward to the feast of Pentecost – the coming of the promised Advocate, The Holy Spirit. We have just observed last Thursday the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord – commemorating Christ’s ascension to the Father. In my own personal life, I have observed the fifth year of my ordination as a Deacon on that very Feast of the Ascension five years ago. So, this is a time for me of profound reflection and prayer about many momentous occasions in the life of the Church, and in my own personal spiritual life.

Today’s Gospel lesson is part of Jesus’ final prayer to Abba, Father, before those fateful events which lead directly to his crucifixion.

The readings we have heard over the past several weeks, taken from the Gospel of John, record some parting sayings of Jesus – and as I mentioned are known as his farewell discourse and prayers. "Now the Son of Man is glorified," Jesus says "and in him God is glorified ... Little children, yet a little while I am with you ... I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more." Goodbye for now, Jesus seems to say. "I am going away and coming back to you."

Jesus is going away, to be sure. But he is going more in the sense of a homecoming, of going off to a family reunion with his father. They are so close--Jesus and Abba. We get a sense of this throughout the strange, rhapsodic chapters of John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In Jesus, the Christ, the word becomes flesh and dwells among us. The author of the fourth Gospel gives us the Logos; gives breath and life and form to this Word. He who was in the beginning with God, Jesus, the Christos, is preparing in these final chapters of John's Gospel to return to the beginning, to God ... to the Father.

He is known to us, then gone. He is present, larger than life. Then he's absent. He is with us, sharing a meal, teaching and praying. And then he is taken.

In this Easter season, we hear how he appears: to Thomas and the twelve in the Upper Room; and again, making breakfast by the lakeshore at the Sea of Tiberius. But just as quickly as he's known to us, he's gone. He appears then disappears.

But he has promised to come back. To be with his disciples – and us – always, even to the end of the ages.

And if He has returned and is with us – with us now – how do we know?

One of the themes – one of the underlying messages – of the lessons of the past few weeks is the Call of Jesus – to us. In today's lesson, we hear Jesus pray to Abba/Father, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Last week we heard Jesus say to his disciples (and to us), "You did not choose me, but I chose you." It's about our "call" – our commission, if you will, from Jesus.

I want to talk about this word – this concept this morning. It's important to me this season because it's a concept – a reality – I have struggled with ever since I began my journey towards a closer, more personal, relationship with God some twenty plus years ago.

"Legalese" and "Religious-ese"

Language we fall into that may mean something to the "professional" but can often be misapplied by the professional, because he or she doesn't really understand it, and it is most often misunderstood or only partially understood by the "non-professional."

"The Call" is one of those words or concepts. I think that it's often misapplied by the "professionals" and misunderstood by the non-professionals.

I think Jesus' final discourse and prayer in John's Gospel, and His Ascension, and Pentecost have a the world to tell us about what "the call of God" really is – about how we know it, and understand it, and how we respond to it?

When we begin reflecting about what God's call means, we start – logically enough – at the beginning. The God of the old and of the new covenant called the world into existence as Creator. And now, in and through Jesus, God calls men and women to himself as Redeemer.

It's important to remember that first and foremost, the call of God is to a person, and this involves the heart, the mind, the conscience and the will – the whole person. But how? And how do we recognize "the call."

With the disciples it's quite straight forward. Jesus was there. They heard him say,

“Follow me.” They followed (granted, just like us, haltingly and erratically – but they heard him and they followed). He’s not physically present to us now like he was to the disciples. So, how about us? How do we recognize or hear “the call.”

I submit that for us – as for the disciples after the Ascension – it has everything to do with the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God – the Spirit of Jesus.

One of my mentors and a friend and guide in my spiritual journey – particularly in my journey towards recognition and response to my call as a priest – was a Jesuit priest by the name of Dick Hauser. Fr. Hauser is the Rector of the Jesuit Community at Creighton University and taught the first class I took as I was trying to discern my “call”(although I really didn’t recognize what I was doing, or what was happening at the time). The class Fr. Hauser taught was called “Discernment of the Spirit.” And he gave me, through that class, a way of understanding the fundamental change in human nature – the “new creation” – that results from the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Fr. Hauser wrote a short very accessible book entitled, *In his Spirit: A Guide to Today’s Spirituality* in which he argues that there are two models of Christian Spirituality based upon two distinct understandings of both human nature and our relationship to God: one he calls the “Western or Self-outside-God Model,” the other he labels the “Scriptural Model or God-in-Self Model.”

Without going into great detail, in the God-outside-Self or Western model the existence of God is not questioned, but God is seen as residing primarily in heaven, outside of the self – out there. The transcendence of God is so stressed that there is little or no acknowledgment of God’s immanence. This is the model that most of us, especially in Western Christianity, operate from.

The consequence of thinking and conceptualizing using this model are many:

In this model, the person is recognized as a complex of body, mind and spirit – but the spirit is seen as human decision-making faculty not in touch with the Holy Spirit. In this model, God’s Spirit has not joined our spirit. This profoundly effects our approach to spirituality, primarily in an understanding that all good desires and actions must originate from our natural capacities – from our will. Our good intentions and good actions flow solely from our desire to please God.

In the Self-in-God, or Scriptural, model, God is seen – in the Holy Spirit – as not only present and dwelling within the person, but for believers in particular, this Spirit is continually active and powerful in our lives.

The fact that we are continually living in the God-outside-Self model makes it extremely difficult for us to discern the Spirit working in and through us.

We are not open to the “movement of the Spirit” because we are constantly “looking for love in all the wrong places” – to coin a phrase. We are constantly looking to ourselves for our answers. We are self-centered, not God-centered. We may use the terminology of the Self-in-God model, but we think in, and operate out of, the assumptions of God-outside-Self model.

The thing we constantly overlook, or fail to recognize, is that human nature is different because of the resurrection. The difference is the result of the sending of the Holy Spirit by Jesus and the Spirit’s new presence in the world in those believing in Jesus. There has been, in fact, a new creation.

This God-in-Self model – fundamentals change in human nature – is seen not only throughout the Gospel lessons of the past few weeks, but throughout John’s entire Gospel, as well as being foretold in Hebrew Scripture.

Listen to the words of the Prophet Jeremiah:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD. Jeremiah 31:33b-34

Listen to St. Paul’s words:

Didn’t you realize that you are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God was living among you? If anybody would destroy the temple of God, God will destroy him, because the temple of God is sacred; and you are that temple. 1 Cor 3:16-17

Listen to Jesus’ own words from our lectionary two weeks ago:

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

All of these passages are often used to talk about the Spirit’s activity in the Church – and that is well and good. But they also speak to us on a fundamental level about ourselves – about the human person, about human nature.

In order to fully understand the New Testament view of the person, it is important to understand the meaning of grace. Paul uses the term often; it means for him everything God has given us in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, then, is really the completion of what God has given us in Jesus.

If we consider grace as the power given us through the presence of the Spirit to enter into deeper relationship with Christ and so become more like him, we begin to better understand “our call.” Our relationship to Christ is similar to human relationships: we are different because of our relationships; in some sense we become like those people we love. It is the same with Jesus. As the Spirit draws us into a deeper relationship with Jesus, we become more like him. But there is an important difference, a difference that is central to an adequate understanding of Christian spirituality. In this relationship Christ is always the initiator; his role is always primary. Without him we can do nothing he tells us. We can go to him only because he first draws us to himself. Any movement toward Christ, any movement toward good, occurs because he sends his help, his Spirit.

It goes without saying that we have a crucial role in keeping ourselves open to the Lord as he extends his initiative – for we are free to ignore (and often do) his promptings and act contrary to them – but this should not dilute the fact that we move toward the Lord and toward good because he enables us to move.

The scriptural model of the person insists that the Holy Spirit is present in us, continually active in us and continually extending initiative moving us away from evil toward good. Our call, our spirituality is our effort with grace to become who we truly are. The deepest level of our being is spiritual – our spirit united with God’s Spirit. This is the level of our freedom and love. Here we are free to move out in love toward God and others or to live a self-centered existence. It is at this level that the Spirit of God is united with the human spirit; at this level God’s Spirit joins our spirit.

To be true to our deepest nature we Christians have the immense task of becoming aware of the movements of the Spirit and responding to them at all times, during our work, our recreation, our prayer. This is our “call.”

How do we hear it? How do we recognize it? Listen to the words of prophet Elijah:

And [the Lord] said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

Listen for that “still small voice” deep within you.