

June 5, 2011
Solemnity of the Ascension
Acts 1:1-11
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before the second half of the 20th century, the only way to cross the ocean was by ship. Every year many thousands booked passage on ocean liners. In the golden age of transatlantic passenger travel, many shipping companies competed: Cunard, Union-Castle, Ellerman Lines, Manchester Liners, P&O, White Star, Red Star, Blue Star, and others. Many were large, prominent companies. They had a simple task: transport people quickly and safely.

Over time, however, the shipping lines lost sight of their primary purpose. They began to compete in luxury and comfort, each new ship outdoing the last. The shipping companies made their identities about luxury and comfort. They thought their survival depended upon it.

While the shipping companies focused their attention on providing luxury, the travel industry was changing. Shipping executives dismissed the airplane because they were tight and cramped, not as elegant and luxurious as ocean liners. But by the late 1950s, transatlantic air travel was doing the primary task better. The airlines were transporting people quickly and safely across the ocean. The shipping companies had lost sight of their primary purpose: transport people quickly and safely, and they started to go out of business. Many of them went bust because they lost sight of what's essential, and what's not essential.

Organizations, and individuals, who are clear and focused about their purpose have more awareness of reality and a better ability to adapt to the changing world. They know what's essential and what's not. Having a strong sense of purpose provides a point of reference, a steady, bright beacon in the dark fog and mist, when the ship is pitching and rolling. Purpose helps us hold steady.

A family has a shared purpose: nurturing life and promoting the growth and development of family members. Members of the family have different roles in accomplishing this task, but they can support each other in their growth, or not. If parents themselves seek growth and learning, then it's much more likely the children will value growth and learning. When everyone is working together, everyone is much better off than if they were alone, on their own. Bears and cheetahs are mostly solitary creatures; humans are not. Human beings require other human beings to grow and thrive.

Church communities are like families. We often speak of a parish family, a place where we receive support to grow and thrive. When I read Paul's letters, I notice him trying to help these churches sort out problems so that they can focus on their purpose. Paul tells the Corinthians, "I'm writing as a father to you, my children. I love you and want you to grow up well, not spoiled." (1 Cor 4:14) He tells the Romans, "I so want to be there to ... watch you grow stronger right before my eyes." (Romans 1:9)

Today's epistle says, "I always give thanks for you and pray that you may have the wisdom and discernment to know God personally, your eyes focused and clear so that you can see what he desires of you." (Eph 1:17-18) He's praying that we may know God. That's where strength and growth come from. Christian communities exist so that we can know God more fully, to enter his life, to share his love, to live with hope. We see ourselves as works in progress, growing into the fullness of humanity through our relationships to Jesus and other people. At its best, the Christian community models growth, shows what it looks like, that it involves ups and downs, pleasure and pain, clarity and uncertainty.

Our growth is nurtured by connecting and identifying with the things above, as our collect today puts it, so that we may in heart and mind thither ascend and dwell with Christ. So much of the world points us in the wrong direction. In our world, heaven and hell co-exist, and staying connected to the things above nurtures us.

Last Sunday's Times had a terrific piece by Jonathan Franzen describing the world below and the world to which we are ascending, and how they're both part of our ordinary, day to day experience.¹ He didn't mention the Ascension, or Jesus, or God or religion, but he beautifully described heaven and hell.

His icon for hell is the latest electronic gadget, be it a BlackBerry Bold, a Droid, or an iPad. Of course, this doesn't mean these are evil devices, but Franzen points out that these products "correspond to our fantasy ideal of an erotic relationship, in which the beloved object asks for nothing and gives everything, instantly, and makes us feel all powerful, and doesn't throw terrible scenes when it's replaced by an even sexier object."

What we desire of technology is to use it to replace "the natural world that's indifferent to our wishes – the world of hurricanes and hardships and breakable hearts, a world of resistance [to our desires] – with a world so responsive to our wishes as to be, effectively, a mere extension of the self." Franzen is describing the Fall, human beings as users. We lost Eden because we wanted absolutely everything to serve ourselves, because we wanted to be God.

Wanting the world to serve us is hell. The things below encourage us to “make it all about me,” to be narcissists, self-absorbed, indifferent to the needs of others. The things above, the reality of heaven, is love, and love involves serving others; it’s self-giving, humility, forgiveness, what we pray for when we say “thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven,” thy love rule my heart.

Another American novelist, Alice Sebold, talks about “getting down in the pit and loving somebody.” It’s muck and mud from the pit that splatters our self-regard, our fantasies of ourselves. Love, the life above, is humbling, and it’s hard. It involves conflict, knocking heads, making peace, and having unity with someone with whom you have irreconcilable differences. This is true about romantic love and the love of family members and the love of friends. Any two people, if they’re honest and real with each other, will have conflict. Love holds together despite differences and not getting our way.

Franzen says, “Love is about bottomless empathy, born out of the heart’s revelation that another person is every bit as real as you are. And this is why love... is always specific. Trying to love all of humanity may be a worthy endeavor, but, in a funny way, it keeps the focus on self, on the self’s own moral or spiritual well-being. Whereas, to love a specific person, and to identify with his or her struggles and joys as if they were your own, you have to surrender some of your self.”

The things below tempt us to put ourselves at the center, to be invincible, unfeeling. Love requires vulnerability; it comes with rejection, pain, and loss.

Today, Ascension Day, as we celebrate Jesus going up, returning to his Father, to the things above, we may forget the flip side. He’s separating from his disciples. They experience loss and pain. They fear: what’s going to happen next now that we’re all alone?

Next week, we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming down upon the disciples, down upon us. It’s a reunion of a sort. The Holy Spirit comes and makes Christ present. We re-enact that in the sacraments. In baptism, we call the Holy Spirit down on a person, and that person becomes part of Christ: united with God and other people; there’s oneness, wholeness, a state of love, a coming together. In the Eucharist, the same thing: we call the Holy Spirit down on the bread and wine, and Christ becomes present, and we receive him into our bodies to make us one with God and each other, to nourish us, to strengthen us, to help us grow.

What the disciples didn’t know as Jesus returned to heaven was that they were going to know him in a different, but powerful way, and that he would be now present to them in all places and all times. We know Christ now not only in sacraments and prayer, but also in each other, the care and love we give and

receive from each other. So the Holy Spirit comes down upon us, makes Christ present in us, so we see Christ in each other. Seeing Christ in one another lifts us up. It's the life of heaven.

This up and down is the coming together of heaven and earth, the goal toward which history is moving. What we see now is a mere seed of what's to be, but the seed is sprouting and growing now – in us as individuals and as a community. God gives the growth, but together we can water it. We can set conditions to promote the growth. That changes lives. That's our purpose. That's our task.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹Jonathan Franzen, "Liking is for Cowards. Go for What Hurts.," The New York Times, May 28, 2011.