

May 21, 2017

Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

“Where do we go from here?”

Well, Bethesda Lutheran Church, the time has come.

We have reached that point that we never thought would happen:

Pastor Tim is officially on sabbatical!

You all are probably keenly aware of this by now,

Because he did his best to keep it at the forefront of our minds

Through announcements and meetings for the

Past few months.

But, it is one thing to hear about Pastor’s plans,

Particularly his impending trips around the world,

For the umpteenth time.

It is a different thing altogether for him to actually be officially off-duty!

He’s gone! He’s away! The pastor is out.

So, with Pastor Tim officially on sabbatical,

Bethesda,

A concern becomes apparent:

Where do we go from here? (not uber serious!)

What do we do as a congregation,

Now that the full-time pastor

And shepherd of the flock

Is away?

Will we lose all bearings of structure,

Preferring anarchy and each person for themselves??

Will we drop church and its activities,

Preferring to play hookie now that the head honcho

Is not around to keep tabs??

Or, will we just tread water for the next three months,

Simply holding a really low bar for our expectations about our faith lives together,

Crossing our fingers that the church just does not burn down,

And calling this a success?

While these thoughts may have triggered some

Unfortunate new expectations for some today,

I think that the Scriptures today may provide us a different

Vision of life together over the next three months and beyond.

Any good vision of life together as the church must begin with Jesus, of course.

Both the John and Acts readings today show

That the disciples are indeed bound together by Jesus, God-with-us.

In the reading from John,

We find Jesus praying about glory.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus has been

Revealing the power and love of God, thus revealing God's glory,

Through miracles, interpretations of those miracles,

Teachings, and the interactions with people around him.

Jesus now asks the Father to glorify him in the Father's presence,

With the glory that Christ had "before the world existed,"

As it reads in v. 5.

John's Jesus is indeed a cosmic Christ, whose light shines throughout all creation.

The opening of John's Gospel begins with these words,

"In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God,

And the word was God."

So, John is claiming here that Jesus is God incarnate, here,

And this is confirmed again at the end of the passage today,

Where Jesus says, "as we are one," that is,

Father and Jesus are one

But how does this affect the disciples?

Jesus has the authority over all people,

For the Creator has given Jesus this authority.

Jesus has been glorifying God through his acts of love,

And he has also made God known to those to whom God entrusted to him,

As he will do in the final act of glory: his death on the cross.

Jesus' love for the disciples, in particular,

Is shown in his intercessory prayer in v. 11.

He asks, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me,

So that they may be one, as we are one."

The disciples have Christ on their side,

Looking out for them and praying for them.

This prayer, made in the midst of the disciples,

Is one for unity, that they may be united in the name of Jesus.

We see the same theme in the Acts reading.

As was hoped for in the John reading,

Jesus does become glorified by God,

Taken away from the disciples into heaven

To be with God the Father.

However, Jesus does simply leave them with nothing.

He promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon his disciples

And give them power to be his witnesses.

They will be the first testifiers of Jesus the Christ.

So, the disciples are centered in Christ, unified in these ways.

The disciples are also a community, building one another up.

Of course, staying unified as a community is quite the task, isn't it?

Simply look at our American Christian landscape

And its tens of thousands of Protestant denominations.

Look at the political landscape and your Facebook feeds.

Look at the state of Iowa on the day of the

University of Iowa vs. Iowa State University annual football game, for crying out loud!

It's madness! THIS IS SPARTA!

Maintaining community was also quite the task for the disciples.

In our Acts reading, the disciples don't quite yet get what Jesus is going to do,
And that can create confusion in their mission.

In verse 6, they ask Jesus,

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

The disciples believe that Jesus is the Messiah, come to earth to save Israel.

This is true. They are right about this.

But, they do not know what redemption by the Messiah will look like,.

They are just a little bit off, just enough to be Jesus' misfits,

Sometimes getting things right, sometimes getting things wrong,

But always in relationship with Jesus.

In John, the problems are much more egregious.

By the time of this passage, Judas Iscariot has already

Left to go betray Jesus.

And, Jesus has told Peter that he will deny Jesus three times.

These acts alone would be enough to destroy any community,

Breaking the foundations of trust among one another

And disintegrating the Jesus movement before it really began.

Unfortunately, these disciples were not the only misfits and sinners

To follow Christ.

This room is chock full of them.

We are all people who sometimes get things right,

And sometimes get things oh-so wrong, unfortunately.

We misunderstand God's will

And we blatantly subvert it, even within this community
That is centered in Christ.
That happens. We are, after all, humans in need of grace and mercy.
Where do we find this grace and mercy?
Here.
Here, we come to be in the presence of God,
In the water, wine and bread,
In the proclamation of the Word,
In praying for and with one another,
And in consoling one another.
We are together, as misfits and sinners
Beholding the love of God.
We follow the tradition of the disciples in Acts in this way.
They pray after Jesus' ascension,
Together in the upper room,
The very room where Jesus offered the bread and wine
As his body and blood.
They wait expectantly for the Holy Spirit
That Jesus promises,
But they do so with this act, this prayer and communal worship,
In unity with one another.
They build up their community with Christ at its center.

Finally, they are called by Jesus to serve the world as his witnesses.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus proclaims that

When the disciples receive the Holy Spirit,

They will be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea

And Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The disciples have a mission: to testify about Jesus,

Who he is and what he has done.

They are to provide witness EVERYWHERE.

Like the disciples,

I think that we are called to do the same.

We are to be Jesus' witnesses here, in Bethesda,

In our home communities around New Haven,

On our vacations or trips away from here,

And to wherever our journeys in the

Coming months and years may end.

We are to proclaim, in word and action,

That Jesus Christ is Lord,

The Messiah, one with God,

Who prays for the unity of all his disciples,

Who is present with us today.

And in whom we are united in worship.

So, what do we do now?

It seems that the John and Acts readings seem to help us

Form a certain vision:

Centered in Christ,

Bethesda is to build community and serve others.

Huh. That's odd.

I think I've heard that somewhere.

OH Yeah. It's the recently adopted statement of focus

Of this very congregation!

If you look at your bulletin inserts,

On the bottom of the third page,

You will see exactly what members of this church have decided to do.

How about that.

No, nobody paid me to advertise the statement of focus.

I didn't even realize that my sermon followed this statement until I had completed it.

This is all to say,

We seem to have some sort of vision, Bethesda,

For what we will do now and in the future.

It seems to be a vision that is risen out of our desire to follow God.

Of course, we must always be on our guard

For solidifying our own visions into idols that want to replace God.

May Jesus continue to intercede for us, be with us,

And shape that vision today and in the days to come.

Amen.