

## The Gifts of Ascension

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We have squeezed into one Sunday a celebration which is easy to figure out, and another one that is anything but; one holiday - secular in nature - which helps to frame our concept of time, and another holiday - religious in context - which redefines time.

We know this weekend best as Memorial Day weekend, the unofficial start of summer. Originally this day began as a day to remember all those who had died in the Civil War, and featured a time for people to decorate the graves of the fallen: Hence the old name "Decoration Day." We in the South had our own day for this, but it meant the same thing – remembrance and thanksgiving for those who had given their lives in defense of our freedom, in the hope that the act of remembering them would, in some small way, keep them alive.

Those who perished in that 19<sup>th</sup> century conflict are almost forgotten now, but it seems like there is always a war to remember the fallen – be it World War I or II, Korean War, Vietnam War, or the wars of our time in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, for many people this is not a weekend to remember only those who have fallen in war. It is also a time to remember those who no longer walk the journey of life with us, by decorating their graves or engaging in some other act of remembrance.

Those who use this time in such solemn remembrance are understandably irritated with those for whom this is just another weekend to fire up the grill, take off on vacation or plan one for later in the summer. It's the start of the 99 days of summer, our radio friends will scream at us, and there's no time like the present for celebrating that, especially around here where it often seems that we have non-stop winters between November and May.

But however we celebrate it, this is a time for remembering that life is more than just a relentless pursuit in the name of doing something. There is a time for something deeper, something that gives our life new meaning: Whether that something is sacrificing, relaxing or remembering, it is still a gift that calls on us to remember this special experience called life.

We can easily understand the concept of Memorial Day. But we have a considerably more difficult time getting our heads wrapped around the Christian liturgical significance of this day – Ascension Sunday, the seventh Sunday after Easter. The temptation exists to just move on past this day and this remembrance. I mean, after all, what do you make of the Ascension of Jesus? We lift it up as part of our affirmation of faith as described in the Apostle's Creed, "...he ascended into heaven ..." We say that, but do we ever really put any thought into it? Like, what did it look like? Did he go blasting off like a rocket, ascend gently like a bird, take a heavenly escalator ride, or what? As casual as those statements are, they are but a poor attempt to figure out the meaning of this day. Some efforts have been even more casual and careless. Noted Methodist minister and Bishop Will Willimon described the time a seminary colleague attached a plastic figure of Jesus to one of those bottle rockets and set it off just as liturgical

procession was going on in the school's chapel. After the rocket buzzed the heads of those processing in, it wound up fizzling out on someone's rooftop, leaving the young seminary student who set off the whole thing with a lot of explaining to do.

So what do we do with the Ascension? If it is mentioned in the Apostle's Creed, it must mean that there is some deep significance to this event. We may not be able to completely figure it out, but it is an event which commands our attention.

We might find some help from an old source. As I mentioned, this is the unofficial start of summer, and this summer we Presbyterians have a special celebration. On July 9 we will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> birthday of John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian/Reformed Tradition. Calvin has long been given the reputation of a gloomy character who thought everyone was messed up and needed to work hard to demonstrate their salvation. That's more 17<sup>th</sup> century Calvinism than original 16<sup>th</sup> century Calvin thought. At the depth of Calvin's thought was a deep devotion to God as the ruler and guider of all people and all situations.

For Calvin, Ascension occupied a special place in the liturgical calendar. For him, the Ascension of Jesus marked the end of one sense of time and the beginning of another; the end of Easter, with its emphasis on the resurrection of Christ, and the beginning of Pentecost, the giving of the gifts of God's Spirit for the empowerment of the church. That might sound about as exciting as watching your grass grow, until you start to plug it into your life and see how through the Ascension Christ has given us a relationship with God that we would never have had otherwise.

According to John McClure, a long time professor of homiletics at Louisville Seminary, Calvin thought that the Ascension had three wonderful benefits for us:

The first: "Through Ascension-faith we experience Christ 'transfusing us with his power.' Calvin envisions Jesus as high and lifted up, seated at the right hand of God, where he 'lavishes spiritual gifts' upon 'his own people.'"

In other words, because of the Ascension of Jesus we have a source of power to think, to do, to perceive that is way beyond us. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone that you were trying to help, and you found yourself saying something profound, something that was deeper than you had ever expressed before, but which made a connection with the other, which allowed you to touch the soul of another? That was Christ lavishing spiritual gifts on you. Not gifts to show off how good or holy or powerful you are. But how loving, how compassionate, how just you are. Through the Ascension Christ gives us gifts to continue his ministry on earth, sometimes in spite of ourselves.

Second: "Ascension-faith experiences Christ as a 'constant advocate and intercessor' who 'prepares a way and access for us to the Father's throne.' Through the eyes of his own faith, Calvin imagines Christ as a kind of holy distraction for God who 'turns the Father's eyes to his own righteousness to avert his gaze from our sins.'"

Oh great – this sounds like a scene from one of those family comedy movies where one kid goes through all kinds of effort to distract a parent’s attention while the other kids can get away with bloody murder. There has to be something else going on here. McClure said that Calvin meant that what Jesus does is akin to messing up the curve in a test, but there is a big difference with this curve. Rather than use the curve as an excuse to keep the class from doing their best, the curve that Jesus sets up is gracious and allows us to live our lives filled with hope and not despair that God is going to get us. Because Jesus has gone to the cross, we don’t have to; but that doesn’t mean that we can live just any kind of life we want to. Our lives are to be lived in grateful response for what Jesus has done for us, and for what Jesus continues to do.

What does Jesus continue to do? That is part three: “Most important, Ascension-faith discovers that Christ’s Ascension ‘has opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom, which had been closed through Adam.’ The Ascension is nothing short of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, a new age in which the faithful Christians find that they have access, through Christ, to God’s ultimate reality and purposes.”

There’s that thing about time again. It always seems to pop up, as if time has been transformed, changed somehow. Funny how that is. Funny how we who follow Jesus often don’t get it.

When the disciples were walking around with the resurrected Jesus, they kept asking him about time, but only in their context. Hey Jesus, is this the time God is going to come and zap our enemies, they asked. Our translation doesn’t put it that way, but that’s what they meant. Hey Jesus, aren’t you going to come back and get all those people who treated you bad. We also have another way of putting that - Hey Jesus, aren’t you going to come back and stick it to all the people who treat me bad?

But neither of these have anything to do with what Jesus is about, and certainly not what his Ascension is all about. It’s not for you to know, Jesus says, as if to say, ‘What are you all dealing with that stuff for?’ He then goes on to tell them about something new that is coming, something so radically new that it will transform their understanding of time and place and purpose all at once. The Holy Spirit will come and fill you with power, he said, and will send you out to be my witnesses, here, there and everywhere.

You will be my witnesses – here, in this church, among people who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and with all the others who come to churches. Those who have been baptized, those who are the insiders, those who have heard about the goodness of faith and who live it out every day.

You will be my witnesses – there, to people out there in the community. To people who rarely show up in church, or have never been; to people who have been turned off by religion, to those who doubt that Jesus ever existed. We may wonder about them, but these are still part of God’s Creation and Christ’s kingdom, people for whom Christ’s ascension has benefits.

You will be my witnesses – everywhere, to all places on earth. To every person, because every person is a part of creation, someone with whom we are linked by God’s love and breath of life.

You will be my witnesses, here, there and everywhere, Jesus said. And then he ascended. And when he ascended, all of that talk about being witnesses really started to take shape. It took shape in the lives of the disciples, in the lives of the early church, in the lives of the Reformers like John Calvin. It took shape in the lives of all those whom we remember on Memorial Day and every day of our lives. And now it takes shape in our lives. It takes shape in how we go about our time here; in how we take each day and celebrate it as a gift, a time to share the good news of God’s love not just for us, but for all. We know that is true, because Jesus has ascended into heaven; and because of that, the gifts of Jesus to his disciples are just beginning. Amen.

Text is Acts 1:1-11

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