

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Jesus Higher Through Reconciliation and Healing"
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Ascension Sunday

Every time I go away to a different culture than my own, I am struck with the number of things I take for granted. Little things, like drinking the water of the tap without thinking about getting sick; or having a certain size shower or bathtub; or having plumbing at all. Part of our time away was in Switzerland where you can drink the water out of pretty well any faucet, and part of the time was spent in the south of France, where we stayed in a lovely older apartment, without running water. Our friends had more than the one apartment, and there was a very adequate washroom between the four of us, which was fine, just different.

As we come to the Scriptures, I am struck again that the culture is not our own and it is removed by millennia from our days. Nevertheless, we have much to learn and much to appreciate. Similarly, we have much to learn today in our own Canadian culture and our relationship to the aboriginal peoples here.

We turn first to the Scriptures. Here we have Dr. Luke telling every friend of God, every God-lover, that the things that happened to Jesus told in his gospel were true. And after the resurrection of Jesus, the Lord personally explained to many people what had happened so they could plainly understand, that indeed he had died, indeed he had come back from the dead, and that now he was going to give his followers their mission.

Their mission, should they decide to accept it, was to spread the Good News that Jesus is the Way to God, and that message was to spread not only in the city they were in (Jerusalem), but also in the surrounding regions (Judea and Samaria) and to the ends of the earth. This would confront other religions, it would declare a new thing that had never before been heard. It would bring confrontation and choice. Many would reject this spiritual path, some would accept it. And so it is to this day.

The difference today is that many of us have lived through a time when most everyone went to church, and it was the thing to do. Now so many people ask, "Why would you want to go to church? I've got no time for that." We live in a post-Christian era, even though most of us have lived through a

time where most everyone around was positive to Christianity, if not actively involved. This is not the age in which we live. I fear we are become more like I see many parts of Europe. The church buildings are very interesting for tourists, but see few worshippers. The Reformed Church, for example, (the equivalent of the Presbyterian Church) in Neuchatel, Switzerland has a large, lovely building in the downtown core, which holds maybe a thousand people, but the congregation is down to thirty on a Sunday.

Many of the lovely buildings we saw in Switzerland and France had many tourists streaming to look at the stunning windows and architecture, but I did not have the impression they had nearly as many worshippers on Sunday. This certainly is true of St. Peter's Cathedral in Geneva where John Calvin preached. His chair is there, although you can't sit in it. It is an impressive edifice, built in the eleventh century. The same is true for William Farel's church in Neuchatel, and for Ulrich Zwingli's church in Zurich. All these great reformers of the 16th centuries certainly stirred up their culture, politics, and the spirituality of their times. The church today seems to be often sidetracked or relegated to being ineffectual or irrelevant to our culture. Much of Europe needs to be re-evangelized and I fear Canada is not far behind. Perhaps the Lord is sending many of our sisters and brothers from Asia and Africa to re-introduce a fervent, life-claiming, passionate Christianity that has been lost.

I believe that kind of Christianity is the kind Dr. Luke was trying to tell us was about to happen at Pentecost. It was the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." This phrase simply means the empowering and full ability to share the faith in such a way that people become followers of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit teaches us not only how to share, but also convicts of sin, and gives us the ability to discern right teaching from wrong. The Holy Spirit comforts us and cares for us. So when we are baptized, that is, given the power, discernment and love we need to pass on the message and life of Christ, then the mission of Jesus on this earth is multiplied at least times the number of lives who follow Him. As the fast food chain sign says, "Billions served." And I would add, "Billions serving who have been served."

The Holy Spirit comes into our lives as we accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, as the One to whom we give our lives. We grow in our understanding of our commitment to Christ, and we grow in our experience

and understanding of our commitment to the Holy Spirit, and to God the Father. To accept One is to accept the whole Trinity into our lives.

So what is the importance of Jesus literally lifted up off the ground and into the heavens at the end of his resurrection appearances and conversations? Many churches around the world make Ascension as great an occasion as Christmas and Easter. Ascension is the final act of the Lord's bodily ministries. It is partly a call to worship Jesus as the risen, lifted up, holy Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We don't know whether he is slightly lifted up and disappears or lifted a great distance until he is not seen, nor do we know all about the weather conditions on that particular day. All these meteorological and choreographic things are not as important as the lifting up of Christ in our hearts, in our decisions, in our daily lives.

Jesus introduced a new way that leads to him without weapons or threats. It gives us opportunity to know Him and those connected to Him. It gives us opportunity to admit our faults and sins, to be real people, where our weaknesses become God's strength in our lives as we choose to trust God in these vulnerable areas. For instance, as a government and as a church culture, we set up residential schools for aboriginal peoples. As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I cannot say it was wrong to introduce native people to Christianity, but the way it was done was wrong. There is a way to share the Gospel and not violate another culture. Yes, there will be a mixing of cultures, including the culture of the Bible, Old and New Testaments. But just as we have celebrated the re-translation of the Innuktitut Bible and the Moravian Church involvement in the Innu culture of Labrador this year, we can witness to the fact that spreading the gospel, as mandated in Acts, chapter 1 can be a good thing.

But when it goes wrong and we sin and make mistakes, it is good to confess those sins and mistakes, and apologize and to make restitution. This is not to say that money makes things right again. It is to say that Jesus' way is not the world's way, as we admit our wrongs and seek to make amends, with all the creativity we have. So one Sunday a year we are reminded to learn of what went wrong with residential schools and our attitudes toward aboriginal people and to encourage a new relationship and a new way of thinking that does not deny the gospel, but rather lives it out faithfully and lovingly.

There may be many details in what I have said with which you would like to disagree. I welcome the opportunity for dialog and for dealing with difficult subjects such as the mixing of cultures in the presentation of Christianity throughout human history. There currently is a broad brush condemnation of missionary efforts over the centuries, with words such as colonialization, imperialism and other negative power relationships. While many sins and mistakes have been made over many centuries, this does not deny the validity nor the mandate of the mission of the Christian church, whether today or in any other area. We need to learn anew how to humbly, yet confidently present the message of the faith while being sensitive to the one listening.

All of us struggle with our backgrounds to one degree or another. Many of us struggle with our family of origin. Many of us struggle with our racial identity, whether in the majority or minority. As we do family histories, we often learn more than what we bargain for, as we find out both the good and the evil of those whose blood has been passed down to us. As we seek to both honor and be critical of our ancestors and spiritual predecessors, may God give us the wisdom to convey the Spirit of Jesus Christ in all situations.

And may Jesus be lifted higher as we seek healing and reconciliation, personally and otherwise.

Let us pray.