

Sermon (Acts 1: 1-14, 5/28/17):

On a television talent show, a young boy, maybe all of 11 or 12 years of age, showed off his magic skills. Of course, any magician worth his or her salt, must include some sort of “now you see it, now you don’t” type of trick and this young magician didn’t disappoint. With the help of his side kick younger sister, he sequestered himself into a box whose flaps were closed one by one until he was completely enclosed. Of course, every effort was made beforehand to prove that the box was legit. They spun it around to show there weren’t any secret compartments or passageways. Then, with a poof of smoke, the flaps fell down to reveal that the boy was gone.

Pretty cool. After a short pause, it became even cooler as this young boy then popped out of a tool box he had earlier placed on the judges’ desk. ‘How did he do that?’ the surprised judges asked.

Perhaps the most intense moment of a trick like that is the pause between the magician’s disappearance and reappearance. It’s in that moment when the audience’s attention is at its anticipatory peak.

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The ascension of Jesus, which the church remembers about this time every year, is a strange and odd story. I’m thinking that about the closest we can get to understanding how those early disciples might have felt at that moment is the pause we experience in a magic trick between disappearance and reappearance. In that moment, one doesn’t know quite what to do, where to look, or what to expect as every nerve in our body is energized with anticipation.

Jesus’ resurrection was tough enough for the disciples but after numerous days of Jesus revealing himself, they had gotten kind of used to the idea that Jesus was back. They even felt emboldened enough to ask Jesus, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?’

Despite all the times Jesus had responded to this type of question, it seems they still didn’t get it. They, often like we, were still stuck in the mode of thinking that God’s idea of fixing the world was to return it to some golden, but ultimately flawed, age such as when King David ruled.

Jesus, somehow mustering up a kind of super human patience, calmly

responds, telling his beloved followers that this information was on a need to know basis and they didn't need to know. Essentially, Jesus told them that the end God was leading all of creation towards was safely in God's hands and, for them, the end was not nearly as important as to what happens in the meantime.

It's interesting how stuck we mortals tend to get on end-of-times thinking, whether it be our own end-of-time-moment or all of creation's end-of-time-moment. When will it happen? What will it look like? What will happen to us and those whom we love? We obsess over it to the point where some reduce scripture to a kind of mystical code which, once cracked, will provide us the exact 'hows' and 'whens' of the end.

In a way, it's understandable. Life is hard, filled with lots of painful losses and fearsome thoughts about what's to come. Worrying about what the future holds can feel a little like an illness that Doctors have trouble diagnosing. The longer we wait for the diagnosis, the more apt our brains are to think the worst.

As much as his disciples obsessively searched for assurances about what's to come, Jesus tended to continually push such inquiries aside, insisting that their real focus needs to be on this in between time. And then, without a very satisfactory answer, Jesus was lifted up into a cloud that whisked him away like a New York city taxi, leaving the disciples standing there – eyes fixed on the sky, mouths hanging open, every nerve on edge anticipating a quick resolution to this pretty keen trick.

We have no idea how long they stayed in that position but, eventually, a couple of angels had to get them moving. 'Time to go.' They said. 'Nothing more to see here. Move on.'

Can you imagine how those poor disciples felt? Like so much else about their journey with Jesus, they didn't see this one coming. Where did Jesus go? What are they supposed to do now? At the very least, Jesus could have left them with some kind of instruction manual or maybe a checklist of some kind perhaps a little like the kind my parents gave me when they left me on my own – take the garbage out, mow the lawn, DO NOT eat all the yodels in the pantry, DO NOT pick a fight with your brothers and sister.

No, the disciples didn't even get that. Jesus just promised them the Holy Spirit, who would come to provide them with what they needed. The Holy what? Can you be a little clearer, Jesus? What's a Holy Spirit? What should we be on the lookout for? Will our cell phones ring with strange sounds? Will the sky light up like a neon sign? What should we watch for?

The wonderful thing about a disappearing and reappearing magic trick is that there are only a scant few seconds between the two. A pause just long enough to grab our attention and keep us on alert. Jesus' ascension and disappearance isn't like that. In fact, in many ways, we are not unlike those disciples whose mouths hung open while they watched Jesus disappear into the clouds. Like them, we're still waiting. We still have our moments of doubt and uncertainty. We still struggle with wondering what we're supposed to do in this extended in-between-time. We still search, sometimes desperately so, for evidence of the Spirit's arrival. Finding the patience and fortitude to wait in faithfulness is far from easy when there is just so much mystery to grapple with.

In fact, if anything, waiting with patience and attentiveness is harder than ever given how accustomed we are to instant everything.

I can't help but to tap my foot when I wait for that one minute countdown on the microwave to heat my lunch. Finding information is as easy as typing a few key words into Google on our computer. In matter of seconds, we have more information than we know what to do with.

It's also hard to wait when there is just so much mess and brokenness around us. Regularly, we find our voices joining with that of the Psalmist who cries out, 'How long, O Lord?'

Twenty-two killed and over fifty injured in a terrorist explosion in Manchester. Most of them young adults and children. As we hear details of the beautiful young lives that have been taken from us and as we feel the powerful grief of their parents, we cry out, 'How long, O Lord?'

On my plane ride home last week, a lady sitting next to me was on the phone every minute she was allowed to use it. She was on her way to the bedside of a loved one who lay dying in a hospital. She tried to console one relative after another, ending each conversation with the

words, ‘Stay strong.’ I couldn’t help but to wonder if the person on the other end had preceded that with the words, ‘How long, O Lord?’

This weekend is Memorial Day weekend when we remember the countless young and talented lives that have been lost to war. Every picture grips our hearts, every story told by veterans tears at our souls, yet it seems our mortal pension for violence is as strong as ever. ‘How long, O Lord?’

‘How long, O Lord?’ we cry, looking to the skies, waiting, hoping, longing for a reappearance of the only One who has the power to bring a kind of peace we cannot create for ourselves.

Staying strong in the waiting is far from easy yet it is this in-between time that Jesus kept telling his disciples to focus on, not the end of times. Waiting well seemed way more important to Jesus than setting up a camp on a hillside to watch the skies for Jesus’ return. In fact, in today’s story, it took a not so gentle nudge from a couple of angels to push Jesus’ followers off that mountain so they could refocus their energies on waiting well.

Waiting well. What did that end up looking like for these disciples? It centered around two things, prayer and staying together.

First, prayer. Whether it be the words of a psalm, our own words, the Lord’s prayer, or maybe even extended times of silent listening, prayer is essential. It, as it is with all relationships, is a kind of conversation that deepens and strengthens our relationship with the holy.

Second, staying together. Sounds great but it’s not always as easy as it sounds. With all the diversity of thought, opinion, ideas, gifts, and abilities that characterize a community of faith, staying together is hard. It was hard back then in Acts and it is hard for us.

Faith is easy when we choose to go it alone. We can come up with all sorts of ideas, thoughts, and interpretations and be totally content with it. We can even become our own god, if you will. No one to push us, stretch us, question us, and challenge us. Easy though it may be, it is also not very spiritually healthy or mature. To be community, means wrestling with some pretty hard stuff together and even learning how to live with our differences. Yet, the interesting thing about being a community like

this is that, in and through this wrestling and struggle to stay together, we find ourselves in a communion with depth rather than the superficiality we often find in other places. We become a communion that profoundly shapes and sustains life for all who are a part of it.

“In the mean-time,” Jesus said just before his ascension, “you will be my witnesses.” Perhaps witnessing to the world what it truly means to stay together, to be community, is one of the greatest gifts the church has to offer in this severely fractured and divided world of ours. Is it easy? Far from it but it is, I believe, what ‘waiting well’ looks like.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

*People: And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, in this time of waiting, we give you thanks and praise for this fellowship you have called us to and made us a part of. By the work of your Spirit, you remind us again and again of how precious this community is. You show us, in times of trouble, how life sustaining it can be. You show us, in times of struggle, new revelations of what it means to be your people. You show us, in times when it is not easy to hold ourselves together, how you make the impossible possible. We thank you this day, for each other, for the love we share even when we disagree, and for the holy we see in each other's faces even when we are not of the same mind.

We pray this day, O God, that you might help us to wait well in these times when it is so difficult to do so. When life feels like it is falling apart, help us to wait well in the confidence that all things rest in your trustworthy hands. When fear about the future consumes our thoughts, help us to be your witnesses in the here and now. When we become stuck and paralyzed, send us angels to nudge towards better things. When staying together is challenging, give us the fortitude to resist the easy way out by running away. And even when all feels lost, give us the courage to show the world around us what it is like to live in a communion of depth, meaning, and healing.

We remember this day, O Lord, the heavy cost of war. We remember those lives cut short by the violence that takes place between nations. We remember those who are forever scarred, both mentally and physically, by battle. As we give thanks for each of these, O Lord, we pray for your peace which surpasses all understanding.

We pray all of this, O God, on this day when troubles seem to rest on every horizon. We pray for leaders of nations dealing

with strife in their own countries and with other countries. We pray for those who are struggling to recover from unfathomable tragedy including the people of Manchester. We pray for those who are frightened because the days ahead feel heavy and ominous. We pray for those who are ill, weak, frail, troubled, lonely, and despondent. We especially ask you to hear these prayers we now name in our silence or aloud....

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

***All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.***