

Waiting in the Promise

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Acts 1:1-5

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

1 John 5:1-5

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

What a joy to be emerging, at last, from this long season of being apart. While we continue to treasure our community of online worshippers, today we finally open our doors for Sunday morning worship for the first time in fourteen months. In this sacred space over the last many weeks we have given thanks for saints who have died at Memorial Services, and we have had a wedding or two, but even so, today feels momentous.

When we closed the church campus last year, we had to shut down with little notice, and then figure out how to be the church together while we were apart. You remember, at first we thought the pandemic closures would last just a matter of weeks, and then just months, and so as far back as last spring, the church staff and lay leaders have been imagining a day like today, when we would reopen.

Yet admittedly, even today, we know we are not leaping forward to an old familiar way of being together all at once. There are still folks who would rather worship online than come inside with so many others. And, as an intergenerational community with children and youth not yet vaccinated, we must re-open slowly with great caution and care.

So now, it feels like we are in a liminal space, meaning we stand at a *threshold*; in a season of time between *what was* and *what comes next*. This liminal moment is a time of transition, of waiting, of not fully knowing what the church will be like when we are all re-gathered down the road. In this time of waiting for a sense of full emergence from this long season apart, there is an important question for us to ponder together: What kind of Church is God calling us forward to be?

Having been isolated from friends and family, we have had to think deeply about what we have missed, from hugging our grandchildren to shaking hands with our friends. So also when it comes to the church, and the sense of community we have missed, I believe we are being called to think anew what it means to be incarnate community, to be a people made one in Christ. To work together as called disciples.

In this liminal time between *what was* and *what comes next*, we have a great opportunity to re-think the values of congregational life, of who we are as a community of faith. This morning, I want to approach this question of What Kind of Church is God calling us to be? from two different angles, first, psychologically, and then from the biblical perspective which emanates from today's scripture readings.

First, Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist at the Wharton School. His recent book has been on the bestseller list since its publication in February: *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. As the title suggests, Grant's basic thesis is that wisdom begins when we realize how much we do not know. He says, "Intelligence is traditionally viewed as the ability to think and learn. Yet, in a turbulent world, there's another set of cognitive skills that matter more: the ability to re-think and re-learn."

Grant calls us to this work – now, amid the bitterly divided and divisive culture which each of us is navigating on our own, and which our larger culture and political discourse is not navigating particularly well. Re-thinking, he argues, may free us to a more civil sense of community. Grant says: "Our convictions can lock us in prisons of our own making. The solution is not to decelerate our thinking – it's to accelerate our re-thinking," and then perhaps we can increase our sense of mutuality and understanding.

Of course, re-thinking is hard to do. It's hard to let go of ideas and convictions that have served us well, and provided us good company as we hunker down in the trenches with other people who think just like we do. Grant goes on, "It takes humility to reconsider our past commitments, doubt to question our present decisions, and curiosity to re-imagine our future plans... Then re-thinking liberates us to do more

an update our knowledge and opinions, it's a tool for leading a more fulfilling life.”¹

As we slowly emerge from this long season of isolation and begin to regather in Christian community, it is time to re-think what congregational life means to us, and how the church offers up to each of us diverse people to know and to love. How can we re-think our call to community?

Let's take one example. When we shut down a year ago, with more time at home, watching the brutal killings of black and brown people, the pandemic uncovered deep fissures in our American psyche around race and the ways systemic racism is imbedded in our corporate American life. There are a lot of folks who think “The Church” is not doing nearly enough to address these issues of racism, or its partner sins of discrimination, inequality and poverty. On the other hand, there are also folks complaining that we are too focused on these conversations about race, and the church should stay out of the culture wars.

Amid these divided and divisive points of view, which are not just out there, but also in here inside the church, it's time for us to talk to one another, to better understand each other across these divisions, to re-think what kind of community God is calling us to be. We have the gospel of Jesus; we have our tradition of the Reformed Faith which calls us to concern for public welfare; and we have one another with whom to engage in moral discourse in light of the gospel and our tradition. This liminal moment between “what was” and “what's next” is precisely our time to engage in this hallowed work prayerfully and carefully.

Which leads me to the second angle on this question – Who is God calling the church to be, from the biblical consideration of today's texts.

¹ Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*, multiple citing's, and Adam Grant, “The Science of Reasoning with Unreasonable People,” *New York Times*, 1/31/21.

As children of God, as followers of Jesus Christ and as Easter people, we are not alone in this liminal space. We have been here before. It is precisely how the Book of Acts begins. As you know, Acts is the only sequel we have to a gospel. From the birth stories of Jesus, the writer of Luke recorded his life, ministry, death and resurrection. But unlike Matthew, Mark and John who ended their gospels with their unique proclamations of the resurrection, Luke kept on telling the story. With Acts, Luke gives us a narrative bridge from the life of Jesus in and around Galilee to the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth, as the Holy Spirit gave birth and breath to the church.

In between the resurrection appearances of the Risen Lord, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, these first verses of Acts remind us that the disciples were also left in a liminal space, a time between “what had been” and what “was to come.” The instructions the disciples were given back then are helpful for us now, in this liminal time in which we find ourselves today.

Jesus ordered them to wait... But Jesus’ commandment is not to wait in a void, rather to wait with extraordinary anticipation. They are to wait in the promise of God, for the powerful winds of the Holy Spirit. Acts says in these opening verses, “while staying with them, Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of God... you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Today, on this first Sunday with some of us re-gathered, we also wait in that promise for what the Holy Spirit has in store for us. If we take this moment to re-think what the community of the church means to us, I believe we will find ourselves called to be faithful in new and exciting ways.

Kermit Moss is both pastor of Manhattan Bible Church in New York, and Interim Director of Black Church Studies at Princeton Seminary. He's made a keen observation for the church to ponder at this moment: "People connect around a cause and they get tired. We need community while we work on the cause."²

Friends, if we reduce the love and justice of God to a mere cause, we will get tired. But if we re-think the blessed giftedness of being part of a diverse community, we will flourish as disciples of Christ.

As my friend Jill Duffield has written, no matter how pressing and valid and righteous, a "cause lumps individuals into categories, transforms abundant life into a zero-sum game and threatens to place winning, not faithfulness, as the goal... That's why we must have a community. A community of accountability. A community of care. A community that emboldens courage. A community that questions my assumptions, calls me on my self-righteousness, and refuses to tolerate my complacency. In short, we need the church. We constantly need to be reminded that the Christian life does not spring from a cause, but it moves toward the promises of God in the way of Jesus Christ. The very one in whom we, a diverse people are united."³

This is the promise in the heart of our text: for those once estranged and hostile to each other the fellowship of the Holy Spirit inextricably binds them together around God's love. How does the Epistle of First John put it? *For the love of God is this, that we obey God's commandments. And God's commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world – our faith!* That is definitely worth re-thinking.

² Kermit Moss quoted by Jill Duffield, citation below.

³ Jill Duffield, "Cause or Community?" *Presbyterian Outlook*, 11/13/17.

After the resurrection appearances came to an end, Jesus did not leave the disciples abandoned. He instructed them, as he instructs us now to wait in the promise of what the Spirit of God has in store for us, and in our waiting to re-think what it means to be a diverse community of faith, a blessed community gathered together, so that we may be sent into the world emboldened by the Spirit to do the work of Jesus Christ himself.

AMEN.