

Sent Into the World

John 17:11-19

Earlier this week, we made yet another first step in our parenting journey. We went to a preschool open house. We sat and listened to the school nurse talk about what kinds of medical paperwork we needed to have on file at the school. We heard from the teachers the skills they'd like the kids to have when they came. But perhaps the hardest thing to hear was that we won't be able to go in the classrooms with them. We have to drop them off outside, and pick them up outside. Other than that, we have to trust them to the teachers and aides. We have to send them off on their own.

It's hard to make those first steps of letting go and sending kids off. I've already seen it some as I have to be patient and let them struggle with putting their clothes or shoes on themselves. I'm told it just gets harder, as kids go from preschool to all day kindergarten to higher grades, until they finally go off on their own to college or work. But while it gets harder, it's also necessary. The goal of a parent is to eventually work yourself out of a job. Eventually, your children won't depend on you to feed or clothe them, to help them with their homework or clean up after them. They'll be able to do that on their own. They'll be able to be sent out, able to survive on their own.

Knowing that, it's fitting that two holidays collide today. The first, Mother's Day, is one that you can't help but notice. Mother's Day sales are all over TV and print ads. And of course, if you've still got a mother this side of heaven, they won't let you forget it.

The other holiday we celebrate today is Ascension Day. It's one of the Feast days of the church, the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus,

but we don't make a big deal out of it. European countries may not have many Christians anymore, but they still celebrate Ascension Day, 40 days after Easter, with a day off of work. Here at Memorial we stop lighting the Christ Candle until Christmas, to show that we've reached the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. The Ascension is as important in the life of Jesus as Christmas is, but we don't get a lot of visitors today, and we didn't have a special service on Thursday to celebrate it on the day we're "supposed" to celebrate it.

But both holidays point us to being sent out into the world. Just as mothers care for children so they can grow up and move out, so too Jesus needed to care for his disciples as they grew in faith and understanding, but not just for themselves. He taught them so they could go and teach others. He sent them out two by two to go preach the Gospel, cast out demons, and heal the sick. As we hear in the Gospel lesson, as Jesus is praying with and for his disciples on the night he would be betrayed, he knows he will leave them. He knows he'll leave them first when he is arrested and crucified. But he also knows he'll leave them for good after his ascension. He won't leave them as orphans; he'll send the Holy Spirit to be their Advocate and Counselor, to teach them the words they'll need. But they will be sent out into the world, and won't just be remaining at Jesus' feet learning from him.

But knowing Jesus is leaving them is hard. They'd just gotten to have him back with them after they thought they'd lost him for good when he died. And as their questions displays, they still don't get it. Even as they're being sent out into the world, though, the disciples are still

clinging to their old way of life. After spending over a month with the risen Jesus, they still ask if he's going to restore the kingdom to Israel. They still wonder if he's going to take political power, and give some to them. They still don't understand all that Jesus' death and resurrection meant.

But Jesus knew they needed different help understanding than he could give them. He knew they'd learn more by doing, by seeing what God could do through them. And so, Jesus left. He'd completed His mission, to defeat death once and for all and to bring God's kingdom to earth, even if it wasn't in the way the disciples were expecting a kingdom to come. And he left so that his mission could go on. He left so that his mission would multiply. It wouldn't be limited to the number of crowds that could gather around to hear his words just spoken by him. He left so the disciples could grow in their faith, spread out and carry the good news to the whole world.

Back when I was at the seminary and on choir tour, this reading from Acts would feature prominently in the tour booklet. The message from the angels, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" was used to remind us that we shouldn't just stand around looking up to heaven. Instead, we should look around and see what else needed to be set up or taken down, make sure we knew our parts, and maybe even talked to the congregation members who were around to greet us, feed us, and host us.

When the angels ask the disciples why they are still standing looking up to heaven, though, it's not because the disciples had work that they needed to be doing. Not yet. Jesus had told them that they should return to Jerusalem to wait. They were to wait for the Holy Spirit.

Then they would be sent out. They would no longer just be disciples, or students, but would be apostles, sent out into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Instead, the disciples are standing there staring at the last place they saw Jesus. They look up and feel abandoned.

Jesus didn't ascend to abandon us. He ascended to complete his mission. O.P. Kretzmann wrote "The Ascension did not take Jesus away... It brought heaven near... In the realm in which He now reigns time and space have no meaning... There is no up and down, no near and far, no darkness, and no distance in the world of faith... He is as near as yesterday's prayer, today's joy, tomorrow's sorrow... His homecoming has made heaven a home for us who still walk far from home..."

We don't just stand at stare at the sky, waiting for Jesus to return. But we don't take our eyes off of the sky, either. We live, as the founder of the Salvation Army, said, with a heart to God and a hand to man.

Jesus did for his disciples what parents do for their children – send them out on their own, trusting they will remember what they've learned. He'll send the Holy Spirit to be with them, to bring to mind all Jesus had taught them, and to give them the words to say as they shared their faith. He promised to be with them to the end of the age. And while he was gone from their sight, he ascended to sit on his throne, to be king of the world. He'd only be a prayer away.

The life of a mother is a tension between holding the child close for protection, and of pushing their child out into the world, to spread their wings and fly. As author Dorothy Canfield puts it, "A mother is not a person to lean on, but

a person to make leaning unnecessary.”
Mothers protect their children, teach their children, but their goal is for their children to grow up and move out on their own.

But even as they go out on their own, they’re not beyond reach. Thanks to text messages and Skype, email, Facebook, and maybe even actual, paper letters and cards, we can communicate with people wherever they are. We can continue to ask our mothers for advice, and they can continue to give it. Sometimes, they’ll even give advice without being asked.

We, too, are now sent out into the world. Like the disciples, we’re not alone. We know the Holy Spirit is at work in the world and in us. We are connected through Jesus with the Father, and we’re connected through Jesus to each other. We are able to pray for one another, and comfort one another. Like a child learning to ride a bike or going off to school, as we’re sent out we’ll stumble and fall and fail. But we know we’re not alone, and we’re loved by a God who will never let us go. That’s a wonderful feeling.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ascension Day (observed)
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