

Ascension/Easter 7C
May 29, 2022

St. Barnabas Bainbridge
Memorial Day weekend

Ascension Day was Thursday, 40 days after the Resurrection; it's one of the seven primary feast days in the Church, ranking right up there with Christmas and Easter. I have a couple memories when it comes to the Ascension. One is a stained glass window in my first church in Havre, MT, which showed Jesus' feet dangling under the clouds with the disciples looking up in wonder. The other was early on in my return to the church after nearly 25 years of absence. I was online and came across a site which had a survey to see what people believed about Jesus' ascension into the clouds. As I look back, I realize it was a very fundamentalist site which promoted literal translation of the Bible, but I didn't get that at the time.

Anyway, the survey asked if you believed that Jesus really actually physically ascended into the air/sky in front of the disciples. I don't recall the exact results, but something like 95% said, of course he did; it says so right there in the Bible. I was in the 5% or possibly less who said, I'm not certain that it actually happened in that physical way.

It made me nervous at the time, thinking that I was out of step with the larger Christian community and I might be in theological trouble, let alone preaching a heresy someday on Bainbridge Island! Of course we still "look up" when talking about the Ascension and fly kites on the beach in celebration. But I am quite content with not knowing how it was that Jesus left their sight, because the most important part is that Jesus left their sight.

This week, another dreadful, traumatic, horrific week in the life of the country, we need Jesus to not be locked into time and place. We don't want him still in Palestine doing his thing. We need him here – with us – with the world. In all times and in all places. We need the Universal Christ among us so that everywhere we "look," we will find him. He can't be "up there," inaccessible. He must be down here, mucking it out with us, weeping alongside us, strengthening us to rail against the forces that refuse to make any changes which will decrease this country's easy access to guns and our shameful rate of killing each other; people of color shopping for groceries in Buffalo and children and teachers in their classrooms in Uvalde, TX. And Virginia Beach three years ago this week. And George Floyd two years ago last week.

You have watched the news and the internet over the past couple weeks as, once again, we are flooded with lists of all the schools where gun violence has taken innocent lives over the past 20 years. We've been given reminders of how old the Sandy Hook students would be by now. We've been shown the statistics of how many incidents of gun violence there have been in our country so far this year – 213 at last count. We've had moments of silence, ringing of bells, fury at the NRA and Congress, reading of names, services of lament, and outrage at the pictures and biographies of 19 students and two teachers this week in Uvalde, TX.

This is not new. We go through these motions every. single. time. And that's what it feels like – going through the motions when nothing seems to motivate those in power to make any substantive changes. What will it take, we cry? If killing children in school won't finally force us

to confront our violent culture, will nothing ever change? Our cries go to God as lament, weeping as Rachel did when her children were no more. [Jeremiah 31:15](#) How long, o Lord, how long? we pray.

Prayer has gotten some really bad press lately, with people scoffing at “thoughts and prayers” because nothing seems to change. We are disgusted by all the political thoughts and prayers because no action follows. One meme said they had named their cats Thoughts and Prayers because they are useless.

We can take issue with that. As Christians, we are praying people, Jesus taught us to pray and so we ignore the cynics [+David Reed, W Texas] and begin with prayer. Prayer isn’t always used well theologically, as if God were a magician and a prayer would get you a better parking spot or cause your team to win a game – because God likes your prayer better than the other team’s, right? We can take some wisdom from others on what might actually happen when we pray:

An unnamed Vicar: “Prayer won’t change a thing. If changing things is what you want to do get up and change things. What prayer does, instead, is show you all the ways of changing you.”

Søren Kirkegaard: “Prayer does not change God, but it changes [the one] who prays.”

Unknown: “Prayer is not about changing the heart of God, but about changing the heart of the one praying.”

That puts the responsibility right back on us, where it should be, to be the change and make the change we wish to see in the world. It was Teresa of Avilá who wrote 500 years ago that Christ has no body, no hands and feet in the world, but ours. He ascended and left it to us to continue. And that doesn’t mean praying that someone else will do the hard work of change while we feel pious and noble in our prayers.

Miroslav Volf, a theologian and professor at Yale Divinity School has said, “There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve.” “Hypocritical” is a word often used to describe Christians and it comes as no surprise. Marcus Borg, of blessed memory, wrote in a footnote in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, that when he asked unchurched university students to write about their impressions of Christianity, they consistently used five adjectives to brand us: literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental and bigoted. Ouch. If that is even part of what is out there from those who aren’t in here, what exactly is it that we wish to convey in word and deed? Prayers of sorrow and lament which don’t result in persistent advocacy for sensible gun regulation? Thoughts and prayers that more guns for the “good guys” will keep us safer? Support for regressive legal opinions which roll back human rights rather than broaden them?

Well.

Dan Clendenin writes that whether we like it or not, we have been branded by a culture that for the most part sees the church as primarily outside the mainstream of life. He wonders if we can “brand” the Bible’s story. Can it be reduced to a phrase that enlightens but doesn’t oversimplify?

Can it describe the breadth and depth of the story of salvation being taken to the ends of the earth? He suggests that the very last verse in our Bible, Revelation 22.21 which we just read, might be it. *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all [the saints. Amen.]*

I suppose we could debate that, but it's pretty hard to argue with grace. Not church promulgated doctrine or dogma or creeds. Not political ideology or damaging theology. Not uniformity in the name of unity. But God's expansive grace offered freely to all through Jesus Christ. God's lavish love for ALL people, without conditions or limits or boundaries.

The really hard part of that? It includes someone who killed people in Buffalo and children in Uvalde and the people who feel the complete opposite of you on issues of the Second Amendment or women's rights. There is hope for all these broken places found in Revelation 22, the last chapter in the Bible, through the liturgical invitation: "Let everyone who is thirsty come."

Four Roman Catholic bishops in California forgot that part this week when they banned the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, from receiving communion because her policy views and votes differ from the party line of the Church. We've heard that proclaimed before and others similarly denied access to the Holy Sacrament.

What was more upsetting to me this week was [the response](#) from the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of California. While his statement of support and inclusion for reception of the Eucharist might at first glance seem laudable, he digs a theological hole by touting his support for Speaker Pelosi's work for women, vulnerable and oppressed people and how important reception of the sacrament is to her. He personally knows her and "endorses" her for reception of Holy Communion.

Holy bread and wine, Batman. In my mind, that is heresy. The Table is open, Bishop Andrus. No matter how noble their lives or "right" their social views or public morality is. That's for God to sort out. Not you. Not us. Let everyone who is thirsty come. Jesus welcomed the thief on the cross next to him and looked for Judas in heaven. If you come to this Table and put out your hands, you're going to get Jesus. No questions asked.

Coming together weekly to be formed and strengthened by Word and Sacrament to work for justice and peace in tangible ways, is how we respond to those 21 people and their families whose names are on the altar. And the 10 from Buffalo. And the other 100+ people dead from mass shootings in 2022 so far, never mind the single incidents of gun violence. At this Table, here present or from home, drinking and eating at the Eucharistic table [Barbara Rossing writes in *Christian Century*], gives us a glimpse of God's future holy city and a taste of its life-giving water. Wherever you are on your walk in faith, you are welcome at this Table.

In John's Gospel, it's the last Thursday, the night before Jesus' crucifixion as he sat with the disciples for a meal. He told them he's going away and they can't follow but he will be sending an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with them until he returns. And then he prayed for them, those busted up, disloyal, unfaithful, stumbling disciples. And not only for them but on behalf of ALL who will believe though their words in every time and place.

It makes the story ours right here. You are in it. Christ's presence is as real now as it was then. He prayed for US, you and me; for our hope and fears, our temptations and longings, our joys and our failures. He prayed we would be one. While that seems far from fulfilled in our world today, its overwhelming potential for good cannot be questioned. The grace of Jesus Christ for all.

The sad and sometimes horrific truth of life in our world right now seems overwhelming and can lend itself to hopelessness. But Martin Luther King reminded us that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. And so, as our cathedral Dean, Steve Thomason, [wrote this week](#), "we must take the long view. We cannot concede our hope to evil and its conspiracy with feckless politicians who lack the courage to act. We cannot concede our hope in God who is calling us to this work, discerning what that might be through the prism of our tears. Love must be our antidote to the venom of gun violence."

Here are the final stanzas from poet Amanda Gorman's new poem, "[Hymn for the Hurting](#)."

This alarm is how we know
we must be altered –
that we must differ or die,
that we must triumph or try.
Thus while hate cannot be terminated,
it *can* be transformed
into a love that lets us live.

May we not just grieve, but give:
may we not just ache, but act;
may our signed right to bear arms
never blind our sight from shared harm;
may we choose our children over chaos.
May another innocent never be lost.

Maybe everything hurts,
our hearts shadowed & strange.
But only when everything hurts
may everything change.

Prayers, yes. Hands and feet, yes. Word and Sacrament, yes. Jesus ever among us, yes.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.

Gail Wheatley+