

Do It Yourself

May 12, 2024

You've Got This!

The congregation that I served when I was fresh out of seminary was massive. It was in the suburbs of Milwaukee and the campus took up a whole city block. We had thousands of people in worship every weekend, and my job was as the director of faith formation. Basically, I ran the education and mission ministries of the church.

For the first six months or so that I was there, every time I scheduled any sort of meeting or event, I would invite the pastor to be there, and he would always decline. At first, I thought it was an accident of the calendar – thought he was already booked at that time. Then, I wondered if the work I was doing was something that he didn't find to be of value.

When the pastor continued to decline my invitations to attend or be part of the meetings and classes and events that I scheduled, I started to take it personally. Maybe he didn't like ME and what I was doing.

Finally, one day I asked why he kept declining my invitations to be part of the ministry I was doing. His answer? He told me that, by virtue of his role, he commanded a certain authority. Whether warranted or not, if he were in the room during a meeting or a class that I was leading, he would be the authority figure. People would automatically look to him for the answers, rather than accepting my leadership. He understood that, by his role, he commanded a certain degree of privilege, and so was intentionally absent in order to allow my leadership to flourish.

The Scriptures

This lesson in leadership and authority comes to mind this week as we celebrate the Ascension. In the reading I just shared with you from the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the story of Jesus ascending into heaven after promising that the Holy Spirit would come to them in short order.

Let's back up just a touch. The book starts out, "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning." Already in this first verse, there are some interesting tidbits. For starters, by saying, "In the first book," our author is telling us this is volume two of a combined work. The same author wrote the Gospel of Luke, and intends the two of them to be a two-volume set.

It's kind of like the two-part TV specials I remember from my childhood. In my head, whenever I read this verse, I can't help but hear the voice of Don Pardo, "When we last saw our hero..." Also interesting is the person to whom this book is addressed, Theophilus. Broken down, Theophilus means "God lover." Whether this was an actual person's name, or whether it was a term of endearment to draw you and me in, God lover, we haven't even gotten all of the way through the first verse of the book, and already it's full of meaning.

Jump ahead a couple of verses, and we're told that for the last 40 days, Jesus has been appearing to the disciples and telling them about the kingdom of God. Again, this deserves some unpacking. The number 40 appears quite regularly in the Bible. Can you remember some of the other instances? In the story of Noah and the flood, it rains for 40 days and 40 nights. Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. The Israelites

wander in the desert for 40 years. The stories of the prophets Elijah, Ezekiel, and Jonah all include references to 40 days. And Jesus, after his baptism, spends 40 days in the wilderness, preparing for his public ministry.

What's interesting is that in all of these stories, after 40 days or 40 years, we hear of people having a profound experience of God, be it the rainbow and the promise to never destroy the whole earth again, or the receiving of the Ten Commandments, or the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

So what?

So, when we're told in our reading today that Jesus had been appearing to his disciples for 40 days, it's our clue to listen up, because something substantial is going to happen again. And what happens is Jesus leaves them.

WAIT A MINUTE! That's the amazing thing this time? Not a promise to never destroy, not a list of core behaviors and values that will create the absolute foundation for how to live well in community, but leaving us?

At first blush, it seems like a bit of a waste of a symbol. "I'm out of here" seems a little...anticlimactic. But then I think back to the example of my boss at my first job out of seminary, and what Jesus is doing becomes clearer.

Friends, I'd like to suggest to you today that one powerful way to interpret the spiritual significance of the Ascension is as empowerment. Just as my boss knew that the parents of the teens I was preparing for Confirmation wouldn't accept my authority on the topic if he was in the room, so, too, Jesus knew that people would keep deferring to him if he stayed here on earth. He had to leave, in order to give us his power and authority.

There's another side to this coin, too. Not only does Jesus understand that people aren't going to trust in the disciples' authority to share the Good News of God if he's always there for them to second guess with, I'd also suggest that Jesus' followers weren't going to truly take up their mantle and live their faith unless Jesus left.

Maybe this facet of the Ascension is hitting me harder than normal because of having a four-year-old in the house right now, but I'm keenly aware that often people don't "level up" unless they have to. My daughter is completely capable of dressing herself, but won't unless left to her own devices.

Yesterday, she drove her little ride-on tractor into a hedge while I was kneeling, prepping a garden bed. If I had been quicker to my feet, she would have leaned on me to pull the toy out of the hedge, rather than climbing off and figuring out how to do it herself.

What the Ascension can mean for us psycho-spiritually, then, is that the power and authority to live the Gospel now rests on us. If God's mercy and compassion and grace are going to abound in this world, it's going to be our doing. Jesus isn't here anymore to do all of the heavy lifting for us. So much of Jesus' ministry was doing things like helping people to see that the laws and norms that his society thought were honoring God were really getting in the way of God

flourishing in people's lives, laws and norms like healing on the sabbath and touching a leper or a menstruating woman.

What Jesus ascending into heaven does is it tells his followers that it's now up to us to continue to liberate human society and practice. It's up to us as Jesus' followers to further his legacy by continuing to break down barriers that hinder God's grace.

And so, the homework that I leave you with this week is twofold, just as I lifted up two aspects of the Ascension today. Our two lessons for today are one, that Jesus left his followers so that the world would recognize their authority, and, two that as his followers we now need to take up Jesus' work where he left off.

Our homework, then, follows suit. First, think and pray about something that you've been doing, some situation in which you've been exerting authority that you don't need to be doing so, and cede that power. Give it away. Allow someone else the authority.

I'll be honest, this can be hard. It might not be done perfectly right away. It definitely won't be done the way you would have done it. When it's tempting to wrestle the authority back to yourself, pray with Jesus about how spectacularly differently we've done this Christianity thing than he would have.

Second, think and pray about something in this world that needs God's healing grace, God's saving love, and then lend your energy toward that effort. Maybe it's climate crisis or housing insecurity or the anti-trans rhetoric that is sweeping our nation. When you think of all of the injustice in the world, remember that "Christ has no hands on earth but yours," and then act. We know that one person cannot change everything. But Christ knows that one person can still make change. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

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