

05/17/15 -- The Ascension of Christ Sunday

"Symbols of the Church: Living 'AS IF' Faith Mattered" -- Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Acts 1:15-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Back when I was recently graduated from college, Kate and I lived in St. Paul, Minnesota. My friend Paul was a musician and poet and community organizer. He was born and raised in St. Paul on the swank and high-end Summit Avenue, one of about 14 children. The place he hung out, though, was about 5 blocks up from his house - Selby Avenue. Selby Avenue, when Kate and I were living in St. Paul, was not a safe place. Shootings, drugs, run-down houses - it was a constant drag on the police. The revitalization program that was instituted went by the ridiculous name, "Accentuate the Positive". Even with all that, though, my friend Paul decided to open up a coffee shop/art gallery/concert venue right smack in the middle of Selby Avenue. He called it Motor Oil Gallery. I saw a ton of punk rock shows there, and a bunch of great art. The coffee was bitter and really strong, almost like motor oil. Maximum Rock and Roll magazines littered the tables along with zines from all over the US. Artists, rock and rollers, punks, writers, poets and interested others all hung out there. I hung out there. The police were always shutting Motor Oil down because of noise violations, occupancy violations, living violations.

Motor Oil Gallery was a big risk for Paul and those who ran it. Art, poetry, music, writing all thrive when they are taking risks, when the creativity is allowed to flourish, when the imagination is unbridled.

Faith is risky. I know we don't think about the risks of faith. It is in Jesus' prayer for the disciples that we get the phrase "be in the world but not of the world". It is never actually said that way anywhere in Scripture. But the point is an important one. Paul restates the phrase by saying, "We no longer see from a human point of view." If we no longer see from the world's point of view, or from a human point of view, then what is our perspective on the world?

1 John 5 tells us: God gave us eternal life and this life is through his Son, Jesus Christ. Now, I know most of you hear this as an absolute kind of thing. You hear it as something about your future and about what happens after you die. That is true, but I also think it speaks to something more as well, to the risks as well as the assurances.

At the beginning of Lent, about 45 days ago, we began Lent and Easter talking about the Symbols of the Church and I suggested the "As If" perspective was also the perspective of the artist and the poet. At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit came down as if like a dove upon Jesus at his baptism. Those words - "as if" and "like" - suggest that a poetic, symbolic way of viewing the world is very much part of our faith perspective.

The same thing is happening in Jesus' baptism and in Jesus' prayer for the disciples today - both events bring an eternal vision to the temporal world. We are being invited into seeing things from God's perspective. Jesus suggests in his prayer that this ability for

us to engage a God-oriented point of view on the world is only possible if Jesus isn't here. Jesus must ascend to be with God so we can see like Jesus in the world.

When Jesus is talking about being in the world but not of the world, he is not talking about rejecting the world. The world is the stage upon which the drama of our spiritual lives gets played out. This is exactly as it should be. John 3 is our evidence for that:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

Or to rephrase, *God loves the world so much, he wants us to adopt the same perspective as his Son - seek the presence of the divine in everyone and everything in order to save the world.*

When you read the Book of Acts, when you hear Jesus' prayer for the disciples, I think it might be valuable to hear something unbridled, risky and flourishing. The Book of Acts is the imagination ignited by the Holy Spirit. Jesus' prayer for the disciples is a call to unleash God's creativity upon the world for the sake of the world. Jesus' baptism is an image for the imagination of God inflamed for the salvation of all things. What if our baptism were exactly the same thing?

If we take a symbolic, "as if" approach to our faith life, our concerns and questions become very different. We begin to see our engagement with our faith and with the world as a creative act, an act that mirrors and continues God's creative act at the very beginning of creation itself, engaging our imagination as it aligns with God's imagination.

Jesus' baptism, his crucifixion and resurrection, and his Ascension, which we celebrate today, are all part of the creative redemption of the world which God intends. The very creativity of the acts themselves are what is redeeming.

God takes great risks in his creative acts in the world. The riskiest of all was with Jesus Christ. We always present the story as a foregone and successful venture because it was God who instituted the action of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But I think the story only really makes sense if the possibility of failure is present, if the risks taken to salvage and save humankind could have failed drastically.

The riskiness of a life of faith and the possibility that we will be unable to redeem the ugly into the beautiful, that hate will not be overcome by love, that despair may actually permanently darken our joy is energizing to the imagination and asks us to seek the presence of God everywhere. The light of Christ is most present when we know also that darkness is present as well. We must engage those things that stand against the things of God as well as those things which are in alignment with God when we are engaging an "As If" perspective.

But we only become participants in God's redemption of the world if we are willing to be the creative agents of God's love in a world gone dark. NT Wright, in a lecture on the Bible and Christian Imagination, says:

We, my friends, are called to live between the vision of the world which is already filled with the glory of God, and a world which is yet to be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea...God intends to flood the world with himself, with his love in fresh ways, in which what we already know of the beauty and power and majesty of creation will be taken up and enhanced yet further when that which is ugly and which defaces God's world has been finally done away in God's project of reconciliation, of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, so that nation will not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore — another Isaiah vision of God's future.

The Bible helps us, enables us, to understand, to re-appropriate, to celebrate the role of the imagination as part of our redeemed, renewed, image-bearing humanness. You need imagination to live in God's world...

*That is what the beauty of this earth is like. It is a true signpost. God has put us in a beautiful world, and wants us to celebrate it, but he wants us then to use our imaginations to write those other parts. We'll get it wrong, we will imagine it wrong, but then we'll get glimmers which are getting it right, and the music will grow, and swell, and we will teach one another, and enlarge one another's horizons so that we can actually glimpse and see that there is to be a yet fuller beauty, a beauty in which the ugliness of this world is redeemed, in which the violence is rebuked, in which the possibilities of this world are finally fulfilled. Our culture is not good at imagining that, and it takes the arts to help us to do it — music, poetry, literature, dance, drama, all of that. **(The Bible and Christian Imagination - Transcript of N.T. Wright's May 18, 2005, Lecture at Seattle Pacific University)***

The redemption which God seeks for the world is the redemption we share in Christ. It is a risky adventure, one that requires us to always act “As If” God’s redemption is still true even when all observable evidence suggests otherwise. ***It means we become artists of life itself.*** An “AS IF” mindset begins with a deep foundation in Christ, is tempered by Scripture and is encouraged by the Holy Spirit. The community becomes a visible presence of Christ’s invisible real presence in the formation and informing of our Christian imagination. We develop an “ascended” worldview, which trusts absolutely in God’s redemptive work with us and for the world.

Let’s try it right now.

What does your Christ-enlightened imagination see when you look at:

Our church

Sunday School

Your memories of the past

Your desires for the future

The Resurrection and the Cross and the Trinity

The design of this space

The hymns we sing

The words you are hearing today?

What are you saying to yourself to stop your imagination?

Are you using memories from the past

Beliefs about how Church ‘should be’

Are you too angry, too sensitive, too...what is it?
Are you being heretical, unBiblical, anti-tradition, anti-progress?

What if we all took the risk of imagining a new world, a new church, a new way of being?

What if we took the risk to express our faith - all of it - the questions, the doubts, the beauty, the glory, the hope and the fears - in word, image, music, film?

What if we took the risk of bringing a Christian imagination to the television program you just watched, the movie you just went to, the rap song you just heard, the mystery novel you just read?

Remember what God did with the sunrise this morning and the sunset last night, the ocean disturbed by the wind, the lake calmed by the sun, the moment of peace you felt when reading a story or listening to a friend, the joy you felt when you saw your new grandchild or remembered your child who now lives far away.

God is already reimagining the world.

Christ is already redeeming the world.

Perhaps, as followers of God and Christ, we can allow ourselves to participate in living "AS IF" GOD is present and let that presence reimagine everything in our world, in our lives, in our church and in our day.

Maybe we can take the risk to live "As If" our faith mattered, "As If" Christ made a difference, in here and out there.

Amen.