

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
 Acts 1:6-14
 May 21, 2023

This past Thursday was Ascension Day. The Ascension refers to the claim of the church that the risen Jesus has “gone up” to share power and honor and glory and majesty with God. It is a claim made in our creed that “he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Now, if you want to, you can vex about this prescientific formulation. But you can also, as I do, take the claim as a majestic poetic affirmation that makes a claim for Jesus, that Jesus now is “high and lifted up” in majesty, that the one crucified and risen is now the one who shares God’s power and rules over all the earth.

The disciples witnessed this departure of Jesus. They have been summoned as witnesses. They have been promised power. They have been instructed to wait. And they have been assured of God’s rule. In the second part of the reading from Acts today, they then go to Jerusalem and gather in the upstairs room where they were staying. They are there with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as Jesus’ brothers; They are gathered to pray and wait.

I find it significant that there are women disciples here with the men. This is more than a footnote. Women are an integral part of the early church. Although, as Gale O’Day writes in the Women’s Bible Commentary, the women do not yet have equal standing with the men: only Mary is named and the other women are anonymous; and when they have an election a few verses later, only a male can be elected to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle.

But something else caught my attention this week. I counted the number of male disciples in verse 13 and came up with 11. Do you sense something strange about this? We instinctively want to read “the twelve disciples.” In his story of the Great Commission, Matthew says, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.” Matthew, and Luke, have used the term “the twelve” so frequently that it has become a catch phrase. We are reminded here at the beginning of the Book of Acts that this is a broken community.

Judas is no longer with them. He will commit suicide a few verses after today’s reading. Of course, that isn’t the only brokenness this community has experienced. Peter has denied Jesus. The others, all the followers except some faithful women, had fled. Luke reminds us: this is a broken community.

I think it is a lot like us because we know brokenness too. What are some of the broken communities we experience?

(1) We all know the pain and separation that comes when people graduate, or change jobs, when children leave home, when old people die. We feel the sadness and grief. But we anticipate this type of broken community, we expect it, and in some sense, we plan for the separation.

(2) There is another kind of broken community which is more difficult for us—the one we did not anticipate or choose. We have all experienced the unexpected death of people we love

who die before they have fully lived. We grieve over our loss for a long time. This community broken by tragic death is difficult for us to understand. We have all been touched directly or indirectly by such tragedies.

(3) Many of us also know the pain and anguish and despair which comes when the community of the family is broken—by unfaithfulness, betrayal, separation, or divorce.

(4) In our own congregation we know that struggles, conflicts, hurt feelings and disagreements sometimes arise.

(5) We face a time in the life of our church where many congregations, especially smaller ones, are closing or struggling to keep their ministry going.

For the evangelist Luke, the author of Acts, it is a broken, imperfect community that receives the Commission “You will be my witnesses.” I find this to be good news. I am often deeply aware of my own faults and weaknesses. As we are in touch with our own brokenness and the brokenness of the communities of which we are a part, then we’re ready to hear the words of the risen Christ.

Without this awareness of the disciples’ broken community, we could easily mistake Jesus’ word as a triumphalistic church growth slogan. Form the mission task forces! Unfurl the banners! “You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.” “Like a mighty army, moves the church of God!” But the reader now knows better. We are painfully aware that the church, embodied in these disciples, possesses no resources to mobilize and has no troop strength to send into the fray. By itself, the church has nothing of what it takes to perform Christ’s mission.

It is to a broken community of disciples, to the group that has shrunk from twelve to eleven, that Jesus says, “You will be my witnesses.” Where will they get the strength for this? They have nothing! Jesus has already told them. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” In this promise, the church, having nothing, is given everything. The call to be Jesus’ witnesses isn’t given to great people, but to ordinary people, broken people, sometimes doubting people—people who are recipients of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, people who are loved by God, people who are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Don’t be afraid. Jesus is alive. Go. Those of are the words of the first Easter sermon from the angels at the empty tomb. Go into all the world with the Good News of the resurrection. You shall be my witnesses. I am with you always.