

Feast of the Ascension

Cycle B, 5.13.18

Acts 1:1-11/Ephesians 1:17-23/Mark 16:15-20

GROWING IN ENLIGHTENMENT

There is a wonderful mystery play from the Middle Ages about the Ascension, updated in language for our purpose. It is said that after Jesus was lifted up from the earth and was ascending to heaven, the two men dressed in white follow after, straining to catch up with Him. These angels cry out: *"Jesus! Jesus! Wait for us!"* Jesus turns to greet them, and as they continue to ascend together, says: *"Yes, my friends! Well done!"* One of the angels replies: *"That is what we should say to you, dear Lord, for you have done all that has been asked of you! But what will happen next? Isn't there more to be done?"*



Jesus answers: *"Well, of course! There's always more to be done! But weren't you paying attention down there? Didn't you hear me tell them to go forth into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature -- continuing my life and work, reconciling the whole world to myself!"* The two angels look at one another somewhat hesitantly, and then look back at Jesus. One of them cautiously says: *"Well, certainly we heard all that. But haven't you been paying attention to them? Do you really think you can count on that lot?"* *"He's right, you know,"* the other angel says. *"Honestly, what's your back-up plan?"*

What will you do if those you have left behind don't continue your work?" Jesus pauses for a moment and then says, simply, *"There is no back-up plan."*

The apostles were a feeble little band, but there was nothing more Jesus could do. There is no back-up plan because the grace set free by the Resurrection, the Ascension, and ultimately the gift of the Holy Spirit was all they needed. And it's all we need. The abiding question is whether and how we will choose to join in the Lord's work. Will we participate fully in the mending of creation, or will we choose to stand back and watch from a comfortable distance? And what a tragedy that would be, a choice to refuse the invitation to be fully alive. It's a gift of love, this calling we have received to be as Jesus was and do as Jesus did, as members of Christ's body. By baptism, we are embraced and challenged to receive the love God offers us in Jesus, and then to move out to share that love unconditionally.



For our hearts to be enlightened we have to allow God's grace to work within us. We have to open ourselves to God's spirit of wisdom and revelation, the truth of this Feast: God is at work within us through Christ. Christ is the powerful one! He has called us to hope—not to despair! Every other kind of rule and authority and power and dominion in this age in the age to come has been placed beneath his feet. The risen Christ reigns! But we have no need to stand staring up at the heavens waiting for Jesus

to come again. Now we are his body—the church. We are the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way!

A story I read recently pointed out to me how the work of Jesus is continued in our world, sometimes by those who aren't necessarily part of the Church. It was a tragedy that ripped St. Paul, Minnesota, apart: On a summer evening in 2016, 32-year old Philando Castile was pulled over by a police officer for a broken tail light. When Castile reached into his pocket for his license, the officer thought Castile was going for a gun and fatally shot the young man. You may remember the video that was shot by his girlfriend who was in the car with Castile. The episode ignited a storm of angry protests around the country.



But the story didn't end there. No one was more devastated by Castile's death than the students at the J.J. Hill Elementary School in St. Paul. Castile, known as "Mr. Phil," supervised the food services program. Castile didn't just work in the cafeteria; he tutored and mentored students, as well. He knew every student's name; he was beloved by the students and staff at J.J. Hill. Castile saw to it that every child had lunch every day, including poorer kids who couldn't afford it. Castile covered many lunches out of his own pocket. So a local university professor and her students created a charity to pay off J.J. Hill's entire student

lunch debt. Students in Prof. Pamela Fergus' Diversity and Ethics Class at Montgomery State University launched *Philando Feeds the Children*. The students have raised more than \$130,000 - enough not only to wipe out the lunch room deficit at J.J. Hill but all student lunch debt across St. Paul's 56 public schools.



Some 70 percent of St. Paul students qualify for free lunches, but many parents aren't aware of the program or struggle to complete the application; many families earn too much to qualify but still have difficulty paying for their children's lunches. Typically, more than 2,000 students end up owing money for lunch at the end of the school year. The students at Montgomery State would now like to raise enough funds to extend the program beyond St. Paul. The program has the blessing of Philando Castile's mother, Valerie. "No child should go hungry," she said, "and this project helps keep my son alive."

The generosity and compassion that Philando Castile inspired continues, even after his tragic death. On this Solemnity of the Lord's Ascension, Jesus calls his disciples - including us - to continue the work of compassion, mercy and reconciliation that Jesus inspired, the work that has been vindicated and perfected in God's raising Jesus from the dead. We who have seen and heard the story of Jesus are now called to bring that hope into the lives of others

and into the life we share as families, as the Church, as the human community. In every kindness we offer, in every word of encouragement and comfort we utter, in every moment we spend listening and supporting, we proclaim the Gospel of the Risen Jesus; every good work - however small or hidden - is a spark of the light of the Risen Christ in our midst.



So take St. Paul at his word and believe in the gifts God has given you: *the hope to which you have been called, the riches of God's glorious inheritance, and the immeasurable greatness of his power.* Use the power of God's grace to imagine the many ways that you can echo the life of Christ in your own daily living. Then use the eyes of your heart to believe that you can do it and to continually pray for the enlightenment that God's Holy Spirit brings to us.

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