

HOMILY ASCENSION SUNDAY - YEAR A (Homily 02)

“Liminal Space and New Life”

(Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20)

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This spring, John who loved to garden, was given a gift of a package of seeds. The description explained that the package contained eleven seeds from Douglas Fir, Ponderosa Pine and Blue Spruce trees. He was quite excited as this would be the first time in his gardening career that he had ever planted trees from seeds. He proceeded to buy some peat pots, soaked them in water, planted the seeds in the little holes at the top, placed the pots in clear plastic covered trays and put the trays in a sunlight spot in the house. His excitement was tempered somewhat when he read that he would have to be patient, as 4-6 weeks were needed before he would notice any growth.

The feast of Ascension Sunday that we celebrate today is very much like the planting of those tree seeds. The disciples needed time to adjust to the new reality that Jesus brought about by his resurrection. Anthropologists call that time liminal space. The word liminal has the meaning of threshold, change, transition, the dormant time between an old reality and a newer reality.

Liminal space is very much a lived reality in our lives. Joyce Rupp, who writes on spirituality, says that we cannot say hello until we have said good bye. Ron Rolheiser, for his part, notes that parenting involves liminal space. He writes, “Good parents know that by hanging on too tightly, by not giving their children the space within which to be absent, they not only stunt their growth, but they deprive themselves of eventually having a wonderful adult come back to them, with something deeper to give than the dependent love of a child. And that is true of every relationship. When children leave home for the first time to begin to live lives on their own, in one fashion or another, they are saying to their parents what Jesus said to his disciples before his Ascension: “It is better for you that I go away. If I do not go away I cannot come back to you in a deeper way.” We speak those words, too, every time we walk out of a door, for years or days, and have to say the word, ‘goodbye’. What is important to remember at every such moment of letting go, is that a secret eternal smile of memory lives on in our hearts.”

It is obvious from the readings that the disciples of Jesus, even after all that time with him during his public ministry, and the experience of his passion, death and resurrection, and now the time of his appearances, still were slow to comprehend the enormity of the newness of life that Jesus was giving to them and to all who

believed in him. Though some worshipped him on the mountain that day, the Gospel tells us that some still doubted, still finding it hard to believe. The reading from Acts adds that they were still focused on political liberation and a material kingdom that they wanted Jesus to restore to Israel. Their all too human slowness to catch on simply underlines the magnitude of the paradigm shift they were being invited to make, a shift so great that a whole week of down time, of prayer and fellowship, pondering and reflection, would be needed locked in the upper room before the Spirit could come to transform them into the Church, the Body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

All the readings try to describe in different ways this new reality that the disciples, our ancestors in the faith, were being invited into. In the first reading, Luke explains that this new reality is all about receiving the Spirit of Jesus, a spirit of power unlike the political power the disciples wanted to experience. This was a spirit of the power of love and forgiveness, which alone can break the cycle of violence in the world. It is this new reality that the disciples were mandated to witness, to the ends of the earth, a far cry from what they had anticipated.

In the Gospel, Jesus is clear that their mission is not to hold political power in a temporal administration, but to evangelize, to go out to the whole world, to make disciples of all nations, to baptize them into this new relationship with God who is Trinity, family, community, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – something no one could ever have conceived before.

They were also to teach not the old Mosaic Law of “eye for eye and tooth for tooth,” but the new law of love, of the reign of God, in short, the Great Commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. It was a new law to even love and forgive our enemies. This is the stuff of the reign of God, and its newness and radicalness necessitated a time of liminal space, of transition, of transformation of their whole belief system, to prepare them for the momentous gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost one week later. They would not, however, be on their own. Jesus would be with them until the end of time, through the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Fr. Daniel O’Leary, in his book *Already Within*, touches on this reality of liminal space and the difficulty to accept a new reality. He speaks of how Fr. Damian Webb OSB pioneered invaluable research into the nursery rhymes and games of children. His research revealed the presence of an intense anxiety about endings and death at a very early age in their psyches. He gathered such knowledge from observing, among other activities, the hopping and skipping of small children over

the cracks in the pavement, together with their chants about life and death, about escaping the devil waiting in the abyss for those who fell between the stone flags. Fr. Damian's lifelong work serves to underline the constant, innate apprehension that surrounds our moments of partings and endings.

The ascension of Jesus is one such moment of parting and ending, which we know led to a new beginning. The editors of the *Living With Christ* point out in their commentary that June is an unusual month in that every Sunday is a major feast, starting with the Ascension and moving on to Pentecost, Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Christ.

We are invited as we celebrate the Eucharist today, to make especially this week before Pentecost a genuine liminal space for ourselves, letting go in faith to old limited understandings of life, and opening ourselves to experience ever more deeply the new life that Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord and Saviour, has come to give us through the gift of his Spirit.

May we be like those minute tree seeds, planted in the dark moist peat which in time and by God's creative energy, will rise to new life as green, growing seedlings bursting with promise, potential and new life.