

First Lesson: Acts 1:1-11
Second Lesson: Ephesians 1:15-23
Psalm 47
Gospel Lesson: Luke 24:44-53

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 29, 2022

“Discipleship Evolution”

Sermon by Pastor David Sivecz

It's that time of the year, especially for many families. Lives are massively changing. The school year has ended. High school seniors are walking across the stage to receive their diplomas. Since I live next to State Farm Stadium, I couldn't help but notice all the graduation ceremonies happening this past week. Soon, those graduating seniors will be going to college, into the workforce, or into the military.

Most of them, if not all, are excited to begin the next phase, a new phase, in their lives. Do you remember what it was like the first September after graduating from high school? I know that was a lifetime ago, but I will never forget it. It was the first time I got to live somewhere new. That's what I thought about as I waited impatiently to arrive at the University of Louisville, or "Looavul."

After spending the previous night in a hotel, my parents and I made our way to the campus to move me into my new dorm room. Once we arrived, I checked in at the front desk, got my key, and some last-minute instructions. Then I took off like I was shot out of a canon, ready to see where I would be living. I flew up three flights of stairs, made my way through the hallway door, and found my room.

When I opened the door, I discovered that I would be sharing a room half the size of my office, with a stranger. Even though I knew I would have a roommate, it didn't hit me until I noticed him asleep on his side.

Once we unpacked the minivan, I made some last-minute touches, and then reality set in – when my parents said goodbye. As we walked down to the main lobby, I stood there with them, shaking. I knew I couldn't go home with them and tried to milk the last few minutes.

Within a couple of seconds, that tough guy act melted away. I stood, with tears in my eyes, scared out of my mind, as I told them, "I can't do this." I didn't know what to do next. I felt out of place. I didn't know my role. Although it was orientation week, and the university did everything to make that transition easy for students, I felt uncomfortable.

While there I made some friends and enjoyed my time there, I eventually transferred to the University of Miami in Florida, where I received my undergraduate degree. Still, this has been a common theme every time I've moved somewhere new. No matter where I go, transitioning has been challenging. Even when people do everything to help, transitioning has its challenges. Transitions can come with unmet expectations, isolation, and unknowns.

After forty days of celebrating Easter Sunday, we begin to transition into a new phase. After forty days, we are left with only what lies ahead. Nothing says the end of the Easter season like Jesus departing this earth. Technically it's not the end – that comes next week.

But after hearing about Christ's resurrection, it almost feels anticlimactic. We celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead and that he fulfilled God's love for the world. We sang those beloved Easter hymns and had the choir and a brass quartet at all three worship services. We were full of excitement. But after forty days, Jesus ascends back to God, and we are left alone. Talk about unmet expectations.

Welcome to Ascension Sunday! What a way to celebrate Christ's final days on earth. Did you know that Ascension Day was this past Thursday? I definitely wouldn't have known if I didn't look at the calendar or wasn't a pastor. Yet the Ascension of Christ is something we believe. It is one of the cornerstones of our faith and tradition.

Every Sunday, through our creeds, we confess that we believe in Christ's Ascension. "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." On the one hand, I'm surprised Ascension Day is not a well-celebrated holiday in the church year. Yet, on the other hand, it makes sense why it isn't well-known. There isn't a lead-up to it. It doesn't involve any preparation or discipline. Those who decide to celebrate it, which is rare, only do so on the following Sunday. So, this transition is anticlimactic.

Even reading our Gospel lesson for this morning felt anticlimactic. After Christ's resurrection, he appeared before the disciples and shared with them a meal. Immediately, Luke wrote that he was carried up to heaven and left them. I'm left wanting more. I'm left thinking, "Is this it?" It's almost a tease. Do you feel that same way?

But it wasn't anticlimactic to the disciples. Jesus didn't just disappear and leave them to be his witnesses. They weren't left to go by themselves to share the good news of Christ's death and resurrection. They weren't just left alone to proclaim the word of God. Christ left a blessing with the disciples.

In other words, Christ shared with them that God's mission, or God's redemption for the world, was not only transitioning but evolving. God's mission was moving from Jesus closing out his ministry here on earth to the start of the greater Christian church. This evolution meant the end of an era and the beginning of another. This evolution meant the disciples were going to begin something new and unfamiliar.

I believe we can understand what the disciples were going through. At American Lutheran Church, not only are we evolving by calling a new senior pastor and entering a new chapter in the life of this church, but we, as the greater Christian church, are evolving. It's been happening for many years.

According to the last Pew Research survey in 2019, 65 percent of American adults were Christian. The previous survey taken in 2014 said 71 percent were Christian, and in 2007 it was 77 percent. It was the lowest estimate from any sizable survey to date. This pace rivals or even exceeds the country's most significant demographic trends, like the growing Hispanic population.

How can having fewer people claim the Christian faith be considered "evolving?" The fact that fewer people are attending church or claiming the Christian faith shows a shift in what it means to be Christian. Being a Christian is more than merely attending worship on Sunday, giving to the church, or reading one's bible. Although those things are important, those first disciples were moved to do something as they watched Christ depart.

They didn't just stand there, look up to the heavens, and feel despair. Instead, they responded to Christ's Ascension by joyfully worshipping God on their way to Jerusalem. They were joyful because - within Christ's blessing - he invited them to participate in the evolution of God's mission. Those disciples were invited to be a part of moving God's mission forward. Christ also extends that same invitation.

Instead of being concerned about people not coming to church, discipleship has evolved from "going to church" to "being the church." It's about participating in God's mission to share Christ's love and bring life to others. In a world that has never seemed more disinterested in the Gospel, it has never needed it more - that's opportunity.

As I mentioned in my sermon two weeks ago, we have the opportunity and ability right now to participate in moving God's mission forward. Two weeks ago, I learned on Saturday evening that there was a mass shooting in my hometown of Buffalo, New York. A young man from Binghamton, New York, drove five hours up to the Buffalo area to slaughter ten people because of their race.

Then on Tuesday of this past week, another young man went to an elementary school and murdered nineteen children and two adults in Uvalde, Texas. I don't know what it's like to lose a child, but I've heard that it's one of the worst experiences a human being can endure. But to drop off a young child at school to learn and then never see them again is incompressible.

The only thing I could think about was what if it was my little nieces or nephews. What if it was one of your grandchildren or great grandchildren. But in both instances - the shooting in Buffalo and Uvalde - there's been a profound opportunity to participate in God's mission showing love and giving life amid moments of death.

In Buffalo, I learned that the grocery store was the only place in that neighborhood where people could get food. Because it's closed for the time being, companies are giving away hundreds of pounds of food. Others are donating money to cover the costs of funerals, pay for counseling services, and help overcome racism. I even heard the offensive tackle of the Buffalo Bills, Dion Dawkins, gave away free opening day tickets to a family of the 3-year boy who lost his father while buying a birthday cake for his son. Although that won't bring their loved one back, that's the way he showed them love.

In Uvalde, efforts are going on as we worship here today. Although there isn't a Lutheran church in that town, our presiding Bishop has connected Lutheran Disaster Response to the community through the Southwest Texas bishop. People are donating blood to help the victims. Two of the local funeral homes are offering their services for free. A food truck driver showed up so he could set up to feed first responders. There are even attorneys coming forward to help the victims.

Yet, both tragedies could've been prevented. A sound rational reason for a civilian to possess automatic weapons still eludes me. For Christians, preventing gun violence is a matter of discipleship, not politics. Let me say that again, for Christians, preventing gun violence is a matter of discipleship, not politics. One more time if that wasn't clearly heard. For Christians, preventing gun violence is a matter of discipleship, not politics.

Yes, hearing about gun violence tragedies during worship might upset and anger some of us. I'm ten times more upset and angry that another preventable mass shooting has happened. So, we should be more upset and angry about these events; rather than it being mentioned during worship.

Furthermore, if I didn't bring up these issues, it would be unfaithful and neglectful on my part as a pastor. Whether here at American Lutheran Church in Sun City, Arizona, in a congregation in Minnesota or Wisconsin, a church in New York, or anywhere else, we need to face these issues rather than ignore them. Again, this is a discipleship and faith issue. It's one of the ways the church is evolving in today's world.

So, on this Ascension Sunday, Christ is not abandoning us or disappearing; instead, it's about the evolution of God's mission. This evolution is about how we literally and figuratively move outside the walls to share God's grace. This evolution is about transcending the status quo, the expected, or "the way it's always been done" to participate in where and how God is already working. Above all, this evolution showed Christ's disciples, back then and now, that greater things were to come.

However, much like the Gospel of Luke, this is only the beginning. Luke is the first volume of a two-volume set. Ascension Day and the Gospel of Luke are a bit of a cliffhanger. Next week we will hear that we are not empowered by our own will. Christ promises us that we are accompanied by something else. So, this evolution is not over. If you're wondering what will happen, then come back to joyful worship next week. Come back because it will set you on fire for God's mission.

- Amen