

Gathered Together
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 1:12-26

The six of us stood silently collecting our thoughts, trying to process what just happened and how it will affect us. One could hear the rumbling of the Greyhound bus in the distance, getting fainter with each passing second. It carried away cargo precious to our family and the families of many others. The bus left behind only a cloud of exhaust that mixed in seamlessly with the stickiness of the July air. My oldest brother was college bound, leaving his family in Lansing, Michigan and headed to Boston, Massachusetts. There was once a family of seven living together each day, sharing many memories, some pleasant and others unpleasant. Now, at least for the next nine months, there were six of us. And even though this event occurred close to twenty-one years ago, the memory is as clear to me as if it happened yesterday. He was the first one to leave the family and travel so far and for so long a time. I can still remember the sadness that we all felt, especially the sadness that my mother felt. How difficult it must have been for her to send her firstborn son off to live thousands of miles away after being with him for eighteen years. How does a family, particularly on this day, a mother, go on when an event occurs that causes great separation?

Perhaps you thought about this question last Monday and the days following when the nation learned about the house at 2207 Seymour Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio and the three women, now released, that were kidnapped and held there for nearly a decade. How did their family members, particularly the mothers, move on after such a separation?

We all experience events that cause separation. Many of us have experienced the separation caused when a child leaves for the first day of school or a loved one leaves for college or for a long-term trip. We live in a military town. Separation is a constant occurrence as fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and grandchildren leave for deployment, separated from friends and family for months at a time. Hopefully, those separations end with a joyful homecoming reunion. There is also the reality that death is separation. Death causes a great rift in family relationships. How do we go on when there is an event that causes great separation?

I can imagine that it must have been a long, quiet walk for the disciples. They are returning to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, East of the city. The Lord Jesus who was with them every day for three years was just taken up from them into heaven. They are sorting through their feelings of *separation* caused by the event of his ascension. Jesus told them when he was still with them that “a little while you will not see me” and then “in a little while you will see me” (Jn 16:16). How long will this “little while” period last? What will discipleship be like without Jesus’ physical, bodily, incarnate presence?

I can imagine that the disciples were also sorting through their feelings of *separation* caused by the betrayal and death of Judas. They were once a group of twelve. They were symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel, God’s chosen people. For three years with Jesus the twelve of them walked together, talked together, laughed together, and ate together. And now one within their inner circle had betrayed them and their Lord. His betrayal was such a burden and heavy weight for him and his conscience that it took his life, leading Judas to commit suicide. As the disciples were walking from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem I can imagine that you could hear the sound of the wind whistling through the trees, the crunch of the earth beneath their steps, and the puffing noise floating through the air with each breath (for more on this

description see the sermon on Acts 1:12-26 by Rev. Travis Scholl, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO). I imagine that what you would not have heard was any of the eleven speaking. It seems to me that each of the eleven disciples was probably alone with his thoughts, sorting through the feelings of *separation*. What will it be like without Judas? How will we go on without Jesus and with only eleven of us? Will someone take Judas' place?

Our reading this morning is helpful to us as we consider how to live separated from those we love and care about. In our reading we get a picture of how the eleven disciples moved on without Jesus and without Judas and it is of great help and encouragement. When the disciples returned to Jerusalem we read that they went to the upper room and they were gathered together with the women, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. There were others with them as well so that the total number was about one-hundred and twenty. We read that all of them were *with one accord and they were devoting themselves to prayer* (1:14). While they were sorting through their feelings and questions surrounding the *separation* from Jesus and Judas they were *united with one another in fellowship* and they were *united with God in prayer*. They moved forward in unity.

Yet, many move on and deal with the feelings of separation by separating themselves. A wife who lost her husband may seclude herself from the company of others and lock herself in her home. A family that said goodbye to a son or brother who went off to college or was deployed in the military may have difficulty "gelling" together as a family unit. A father and husband may separate himself from his church community and may cut himself off from prayer to God as a way of dealing with the loss of a spouse or son or daughter. Many of us may deal with our feelings of separation by separating ourselves from others and from God. This is why our reading from Acts is so helpful for us. It is helpful especially on a day like Mothers' Day. So many mothers are gathered together with their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. They are celebrating the day and enjoying their time together. At the same time other mothers are separated from loved ones and sorting through the feelings of separation.

But the disciples model a better way for us. In the midst of great tragedy and while sorting through the feelings of great separation caused by the ascension of Jesus and the death and betrayal of Judas, the disciples are drawn even closer together with one another and with God. They do not separate themselves. They are drawn closer to God through prayer and prayer gathers them closer to one another,

We daily experience the separation. We experience the rift in relationships and sort through the feelings of sadness, sorrow, and emptiness. But because Christ was once separated from his Heavenly Father out of great love for you and me, you experience these feelings in unity with him. On the cross Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mt 27:46)? It is a cry of separation. He was forsaken and abandoned as the bearer of your Sin and mine. The sin that separates you from your holy God was taken upon his Son so that you may be gathered together with your God once again. Through Christ your sins are forgiven. Your life with God is restored and now God unites you to a community of believers. Just as God brought the disciples together in unity with him and one another, so too here at Atonement God brings you into relationship with one another where you gather around the Word of God and the Sacraments and are devoted to prayer. We gather in unity around Jesus, the burden-bearer, and we receive his grace that enables us to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Your God does not leave you in isolation but calls you into a family of faith where he continues to restore you to himself and to one another.

This morning we witnessed the baptism of five-year old Christian. What a great Mothers' Day gift that God allowed this young man to give his mother. He and his whole family now have the certainty and assurance that Christian is gathered *together* forever with them and his God. Even in the midst of separation, there is unity through the forgiveness of sins.

In this world we will deal with the feelings of separation from one another. It is a reality. But through faith in Christ you live in the hope of that Day when God will fully complete his restoration work. On that Day he will unite you fully and completely with himself and the whole community of believers. Just as Jesus has ascended, we too will ascend to live together forever with our loved ones who have died in the faith before us—gathered *together*. Amen.