

## GLORIFY AND ENJOY

Acts 1:1-11

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 24, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is both the Sunday after the Ascension of the Lord and the Sunday of Memorial Day Weekend.*

### FOCUS TEXT:

*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'*

*So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'*

This past Thursday a significant Christian holiday passed more or less unnoticed by most of us Presbyterians. The holiday we missed was Ascension Day, the day forty days after the resurrection of Christ and ten days prior to the gift of the spirit at Pentecost.

I dare say that some of us have to think for a minute to remember the distinction between the resurrection of Christ and his ascension:

- Jesus was not raised directly into heaven, but, as we say in one of our affirmations of faith, "he was raised on the third day, and [then] appeared first to the women, then to Peter, and to the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses."<sup>1</sup>
- After forty days of such appearances, the risen Christ ascended on a cloud into heaven, where, as we say in the Apostles' Creed, "he sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

By passing over the Ascension, we miss an opportunity to think about, among other things, heavenly power and earthly power, the Kingdom of God and human kingdoms, faith and politics.

We shall not miss that opportunity today.

*Let us pray: Lord God, you have placed us on a particular land, in a particular nation, at a particular time in history. We thank you for such placement, even as we cannot help but be overwhelmed by it at times. May the spirit you gave the early apostles' to be your witnesses in and beyond their cities reside in us as we hear this sermon that we might be gain wisdom and power to be effective witnesses on your behalf in and beyond our city. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

---

<sup>1</sup> This summary creed contains a selection of Bible verses, many from I Corinthians. We use it as an Affirmation of Faith, as it is a summary of the early church's proclamation.

## I.

In the past few months, I have participated in three manifestations of Christian faith melded to particular political movements or events from our nation's history. In each instance, this melding of faith and politics has had both beauty and integrity.

The first instance was on a Congressional pilgrimage I attended the first weekend of March through the Faith and Politics Institute, an organization on whose board I am active. Every two years, this organization takes 200 or more people, including 20 or so members of congress, to visit important sites in the Civil Rights Movement.

- We visited the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where four girls were killed in a bombing;
- the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, where Dr. Martin Luther King began his ministry;
- the Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, the launching point for an historic march over the Edmund Pettis Bridge;
- and we joined twenty-thousand others in an annual re-enactment of that march, which was a catalyst for passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>2</sup>

As I have shared with you previously, as a child and teenager, I watched the Civil Rights Movement unfold in my native South. Observing racism among many adults around me, I had a deep childhood sense that "there had to be a better way." When Martin Luther King, Jr., lost his life in my hometown, I was thirteen. I learned that the minister of the small, close-knit Presbyterian Church that was such an important part of my family's life had actually planned to march with Dr. King on what turned out to be the day after his death. I later learned that other Presbyterian clergy in the city were supportive of efforts to bring about racial reconciliation. I soon realized that the Christian faith in which I was raised – including its Presbyterian version – was part of that "better way."

On the pilgrimage in March, I heard Peggy Wallace Kennedy speak at Brown Chapel in Selma. Ms. Kennedy is the daughter of the late Governor George Wallace. She said that as a child, watching her father stand in the doorway of the University of Alabama to block admission of black students, she knew deep down inside that his action was wrong. She knew there was a better way. Her words pulled my heart into my throat. In her story, I heard my story.<sup>3</sup>

\*\*

Fast forward to April 20<sup>th</sup> of this year. A cold rainy Monday. The outdoor columbarium at Arlington National Cemetery. A group of family and friends gathered to commit to their resting place the ashes of Butch Heinlein, a long-time member of our church.

With the exception of the service being at Arlington Cemetery, which is still a relatively new place for me, his funeral was like several dozen others I have conducted over the years, laying to rest veterans of World War II.

The elements of these services are nearly always the same.

- An honor guard
- A bugler playing taps
- The folding and presenting of the flag to grieving but proud widow
- A twenty-one gun salute.<sup>4</sup>

Whether these services are on frozen ground in the Midwest, accompanied by aging color guards and sometimes off-key buglers, or at Arlington Cemetery, with finest and freshest from Ft. Meyer, I experience these services as a beautiful melding of Christian faith and the historical accomplishment of what we know as "the greatest generation." Even when I barely know the deceased, I read the words of the funeral service holding back tears.

\*\*

Then earlier this month, May 6<sup>th</sup>, at the Washington Court Hotel, 7:30 a.m., I joined 160 people at a St. Joseph's Day Breakfast honoring the contributions of the Labor Movement to his country.

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the pilgrimage, see <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101972753>.

<sup>3</sup> Available at [http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2009/03/george\\_wallaces\\_daughter\\_intro.html](http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2009/03/george_wallaces_daughter_intro.html).

<sup>4</sup> The actual terminology for this is a "three volley salute," though we commonly refer to it as a "twenty-one gun salute."

St. Joseph is the patron-saint of labor. A Catholic priest presided over the event; another gave the invocation; a third was introduced as well.

- A Republican member of congress who grew up in a family-owned trucking business spoke, as did a Democratic member who grew up in a union household in the Bronx.
- They spoke of their Catholic faith, their local parish, the way their faith had influenced the dignity and commitment of the work their families did with their hands.

For me, the breakfast represented a beautiful melding of a particular form of Christianity – urban Catholicism – and the labor movement in this country.<sup>5</sup>

## II.

What do these three events – a pilgrimage, a graveside service, and a breakfast – have to do with the Ascension of Jesus Christ?

### (a)

These events remind us that the Christ who ascended into heaven is the same Christ that came as God incarnate – God in the flesh.

Jesus Christ was a first century, free Jewish male.

- Into that culture he was born
- To that culture he announced the reign of God
- In that culture he died, was raised, appeared for forty days
- And from that culture he ascended into heaven.

The Christ who now resides “at the right hand of God the Father Almighty” is the same Christ who was and is present to us in the particular circumstances of our lives and history. Just as there was historical particularity to his life, there is historical particularity to ours.

As Christian faith infused the lives of many of our nation’s soldiers in World War II, as African-American Christianity inspired the Civil Rights movement, and as urban Catholicism helped buttress the Labor Movement, Jesus Christ was present, in a beautiful and coherent way, in each of those movements. I was able to witness that beauty and coherence in March and April and May of this year.

### (b)

But just as the Ascension reminds us that Christ lived in a particular time, it also reminds us that Christ challenges each culture – or shall I say “sub-culture” – in which he reigns.

Notice that immediately before the Ascension, the disciples ask the risen Lord: “Is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to *Israel*?”

- Despite the fact that they have been with Jesus for three years and have heard virtually all his teachings
- Despite the fact that they have watched him suffer and die
- Despite the fact that he has appeared to them resurrected and that they have spent the past forty days with him in this form

at the moment of his departure they still ask an ultimately narrow question: “Is *now* the time you are going to restore *our nation* to power?”

This question isn’t some power play on the part of Jews as Jews. Nor is it simply a besieged minority yearning for legitimate rights. *Rather, their question reveals how deeply imbedded in the human heart is the notion that the reign of God looks like our reign.* Their question shows how deeply we desire that God’s reign bless our reign without impediment or criticism, without even a hand raised in the back of the room, saying, “But Teacher, have you thought about this?”

---

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see <http://faithandpolitics.org/?q=node/601>.

To their politically narrow question, the risen Christ responds:

- “It is not for *you* to know the times or periods that the Father has set by *his* own authority.”
- “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you [not when your own visions are met].”
- “And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem [the city that is home to you] but [you will also be my witnesses] in all of Judea and [in] Samaria [where no one wants to go or claim] and to the ends of the earth.”

Then “poof” – Jesus ascends to heaven.

\*\*

Jesus’ answer leads me to conclude that there is something in the nature of Jesus Christ

- That sees the beauty and integrity of *our* kingdoms but refuses to bless any one of them fully
- That sees the good in the political orders we forge but refuses to be limited *by* or *to* any one of them
- And that leads us to accept and even affirm kingdoms *other than our own* that stand with similar integrity to ours as part of God’s reign on earth.

It is as if Christ is saying: “When Spirit comes, you can bet it won’t simply bless your own realm, but challenge it as well, and lead you to look at other realms as well.”

“You shall be my witnesses even to the ends of the earth.”

#### IV.

One final experience which brings us to the title of the sermon, and, I believe, to its application.

For a few hours Monday I shepherded around Washington a lifelong friend who has spent his professional life as a policy advisor to elected officials and his volunteer time as an elder in the Presbyterian Church. Through reading, writing, and study, he has for three decades sought to relate the Christian faith to American political life. He is currently in residence at a think-tank in Princeton; his visit to D.C. this week was part of a sabbatical project.

After we had finished an appointment, we ducked into a Starbucks and began to muse about his efforts to relate the Presbyterian faith we shared from childhood to his adult life in politics and to my efforts to be a minister in this community.

“Trying to make sense of all this isn’t a problem for my wife,” he said. “When we married, she left her Episcopal roots for my Presbyterianism; even though she knows as much about politics as I do, what she really loves about the church is the music, the preaching, the worship. She doesn’t have the obsession I do to figure out the relationship between her faith and her politics.”

In a rare moment of instant, rather than delayed, clarity, I said: “Your wife has it right. Theology is ‘second-order’ Christianity; the ‘first order’ is worship.”

“Remember when we memorized the Westminster Catechism for confirmation?” I continued. “‘Question 1: What is the chief end of man?’”

He recited the answer as I said it: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

“‘Glorify’ and ‘enjoy’ are words of worship,” I continued. “Worship is ‘first-order’ Christianity; our theology, our ethics, our politics, follow; they are ‘second-order.’”

\*\*

Since worship is the “first order,” worship is the center of what we do as the church. “We glorify God and enjoy God forever.” It is to worship we come. It is in worship we gather as the children of God. And it is from worship that we leave to try to figure out what the right thing is to do in the political order and then – as individuals and sometimes as the body of Christ – do our best to do it.

Amen.