Invitation to the Table

In John's Gospel, at the table with his disciples, Jesus said, *"I'm giving you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you"* (JOHN 15:12).

The first Epistle of John is more abrupt: *"Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen."* (I JOHN 4:20)

39 times in the Gospel of John and 33 times in the Epistles of John—72 times in the combined body of Johannine writings, we are called to love one another.

In the other three gospels, when Jesus is asked, *"Which is the greatest commandment?"* he responds with the familiar, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind,"* and then he adds, *"the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself."* And he follows up: *"All the law and the prophets* [which made up the entire Bible in his day] *all of Scripture boils down to those two commandments."*

Down in Texas, a young seminary student and former middle school teacher is running for the U. S. Senate, and his campaign centers around the ethic of loving your neighbor as yourself. And as he applies it, Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan removes all qualifications and limitations on the word, "neighbor."

His campaign is a practical, tangible way of living out the call to love our neighbor: our Muslim neighbor, our Hindu neighbor, our Jewish neighbor, our agnostic or atheist neighbor, our neighbor of color, our gay or trans neighbor. His campaign calls out all of us who claim to be Christian: you gonna' really live according to what you say you believe?

At the Table today I invite you to consider how you will continue to live out the "Greatest Commandment" and the second one that's "just like it."

Our Communion Hymn is #384, "Here at Thy Table, Lord."

Pastoral Prayer[1]

God of mystery, we so easily identify with those disciples who witnessed the ascension. In the first place, this whole idea of ascension is confusing—hard to comprehend. We can understand their confusion, standing there, necks craned upward, staring into the clouds.

Just when they were starting to believe, they even were beginning to understand, he was taken—arrested, crucified, buried. But then Easter came and he was back! Hope had returned! And now, just as quickly, he's gone again—ascended into heaven.

Lord Jesus, we never had the blessing of walking with you in the flesh as they did—listening to your teaching, being amazed at his miracles; and yet, through their witness you continually come to us and invite us into partnership in transforming the world.

Through their witness you continually reveal to us the truth about the heart of your Father.

You call us to walk in your way, and through their witness we trust that you have not left us to do it alone.

Remind us, Lord, that discipleship is not a solo performance. You not only tell us what to do—you give us power to do it. And you call us together as an interdependent, spiritually gifted gathering—a team of partnership with you and with each other.

You not only call us to follow—you walk beside us.

You not only send us as our witnesses—you intercede for us when our witness falters.

So pray for us, Lord Jesus. Speak to the Father about us.

And with your help, we will be the disciples you deserve.

Amen.

[1] Adapted and paraphrased from a part of Will Willimon's commentary in May 17, 2026: Left Not Alone

Restoring the Kingdom

ACTS 1:6-17 (NRSVUE) *So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"* [7]*He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.* [8]*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."* [9]*When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.* [10]*While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.* [11]*They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward 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."* [12]*Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.* [13]*When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.* [14]*All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*

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The Word of God for the people of God!

William Wordsworth wrote: "The world is too much with us…" These days, all of us, some of the time, and some of us, all of the time, would like to experience an Ascension, to be lifted up and a cloud just take us out of sight of all of this. But we're embedded in life's challenges every morning as we check the news, whatever source—mass shootings, irrational political policies, uncivil banter on social media, war in Ukraine and Iran and the Strait of Hormuz, Russia and China rattling their sabers, the erosion of human rights led by people with no clear strategy or humane concerns, fellow Christians aligning themselves with a would-be demigod.

We'd love to escape or at least go away for a while. But, we're in this world that is too much with us; escape is impossible, and if our faith is to be relevant, we need to join scripture and cable news and newsfeeds. The fact is, virtually all of scripture was written in times of crisis, violence, and uncertainty like our own.

In today's Ascension reading, two men in white robes ask: "Why are you looking at heaven?" Can we be heavenly minded and still be of some earthly good? Can we have an eternal hope, can we embrace an afterlife and still embrace a worldly beauty; still seek justice in our earthly lives? The men in white robes asked, "Why are you looking to heaven? He'll be back." Meanwhile...

Ironically, the disciples had just asked Jesus an earthly question, "Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?" Where have they been? For three years they've been following Jesus around, listening to his teachings, scratching their heads over his parables, watching his miracles—every day he's been showing them who he is, and therefore who God is; and therefore, who they are meant to become.

He came proclaiming, "The kingdom is among/within you!" This is it! In Luke (and remember: Luke wrote both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles—our text

this morning) In Luke, 41 times Jesus mentions the kingdom, and not once does he connect the kingdom of God with any political kingdom or himself as a military leader to overthrow Rome and "restore the kingdom" of David. Not once. In fact, not once in any of the four gospels. In Matthew Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Listen to just a few of Jesus' kingdom comments in Luke:

*"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the **kingdom** of God." (6:20)*

*"To you it has been given to know the secrets of the **kingdom** of God, but to others, when I speak in parables, they're 'looking but they do not perceive and hearing but they do not understand.'" (8:10)*

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (9:62)

In chapter 9 he sent out the twelve: … *to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (9:2)* And when they return, he says to them:

"Indeed, truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see [remember that word] *…before they see the kingdom of God." (9:27)*

In chapter 10 he sends out the seventy: *"…cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" (10:9)*

For Luke, the kingdom of God is present and seen in Jesus and in that context the meaning of seeing leans more toward understanding than visualizing. In John Jesus said, "If you've seen me you've seen the Father." In Matthew he said, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me." And when Luke speaks of Messiah it is "The Messiah of God." Messiah means the anointed one, the expected one, and in Luke, *Jesus is the fulfillment of all God intended and promised, plus the realignment of all Israel expected.* Israel's Messiah would retore a political kingdom based on military superiority. As the Messiah of God, Jesus came to lead a community of faith based on love of God and love of neighbor.

Israel and the disciples were having none of it: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" You can't blame them. For 600 years, dating back to Babylonian captivity, Israel hoped for a military hero to overthrow their oppressors and restore the kingdom of Israel to the glory days of David. It was engrained in them!

But the kingdom never left the earth, because God never abandoned earth. God was always present, but not exclusively in Israel. The very foundation of Israel's existence: the covenant with Abraham, is clear: God said to Abraham, "I will bless you so you will be a blessing… and through you all nations of the earth will be blessed." That's the constitution of the kingdom of God.

However we may understand Luke's ascension story, one thing is clear: Jesus is no longer in a physical body on earth. We're left with experiencing his presence

through spiritual disciplines or mediated through human relationships. Still, Jesus' absence is not a valid rationalization for abandoning our planet or our ethical obligations: "...***why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"*** God is in us and with us, leading us forward into new adventures in faithful discipleship.

And we're not left without resources: "...***you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...***" We often feel inadequate. I'm sure the disciples "looking up to heaven" had second thoughts about moving on without Jesus. Let's just wait until he comes back and takes us to heaven. It's hard work dealing with white racism and politicians that exploit it. It's hard dealing with science deniers and election deniers and deniers of global climate change. But we're not helpless. We're not alone. God never abandoned this world he created and loves. We call that presence Spirit, and when we experience it, we sense unexplained power and resources to be partners with Christ in healing and creative transformation on earth as it is in heaven.

"You will receive power... and you will be my witnesses—here—in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So, they went back to Jerusalem and gathered—together. Together: a word that permeates the Scriptures far beyond today's reading. And there was a particular characteristic about their being together, a particular quality that bound them as a true community: ***All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer...*** And in the next chapter: ***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (2:42)***

Prayer makes a difference. But there was a particular characteristic about the way they were in prayer: they ***"were constantly devoting themselves to prayer."*** They just kept showing up—not reciting memorized prayers or reading prepared prayers at the Table or the Pulpit; although there is value in all of that. They were constantly at it—not doing all the talking; listening, seeking, discerning: "God, what do you want to accomplish through us?" How else should we understand what happened next? I'll give you a hint: next Sunday is Pentecost!

And it all began with a question asked by some guys that hadn't been listening; hadn't been paying attention; were immersed in their own expectations, their own agendas and ambitions: ***"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"***

In a way, our call is always to restore the kingdom, because there always are those whose best intentions damage it and send it into exile. Our call is to just keep showing up—just keep coming together—just keep on constantly devoting ourselves to prayer, with a redirected sense of messianic hope: ***"...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."***

So, let's not be standing around looking up into heaven. Pray with me.