

You Can't Be a Disciple Without the Divine

Easter Season Series on Discipleship Week 5

Acts 1:1-14

June 2, 2019 Ascension Sunday

Today we begin our series on the book of Acts. The first thing we need to establish is that the book of Acts was written by Luke. He wrote it as a sequel to the gospel of Luke and addressed it to an unknown recipient, Theophilus, which literally means lover of God. That's us!

Luke begins the book of Acts with a little review of the Ascension, which he also wrote about in his gospel. The Ascension is one of those lesser known holidays on the liturgical calendar. It took place forty days after Easter, which would have been this past Thursday. Rather than call everyone back to church on Thursday night, most Christian churches today just celebrate the Ascension on the closest Sunday following, which is today. Happy Ascension Sunday!

The Ascension is a mysterious event. Luke tells us in his gospel that, forty days after Easter, after having appeared to his disciples multiple times, Jesus appeared to them one last time. He led them out to Bethany, lifted up his hands and blessed them, and was taken into heaven. The disciples were filled with awe and worshipped their risen and ascended Lord. Then they obeyed Jesus' instructions and went back to Jerusalem, filled with joy. They stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

I have to give the disciples a lot of credit for that, being able to be so happy. We could certainly understand if, instead of being happy and filled with joy, they felt sad or confused, or just plain tired. It has been quite a roller coaster ride for the disciples! For three years they traveled with Jesus, listening to him teach the crowds, watching him challenge the authorities, and witnessing many miracles. He predicted his death and resurrection several times, but when it happened, they weren't ready. Over the last few weeks we have been talking about his resurrection appearances and how the disciples used the time after Easter Sunday to reflect on their experiences and solidify their faith. Just about when they were probably getting used to a new normal—the resurrected Jesus—he leaves them!

Something similar is happening all around the country these days, as parents of high school seniors attend graduation ceremonies. "Commencement" we call it, marking the end of K-12 education, yes, but the beginning, the commencing of a new phase of life. Football stadiums and auditoriums will be filled with happy parents and even happier students. There will be great joy! But after the parties end, there will be a range of

emotions during a transition time. Parents and young adults will have to figure out new ways of relating and staying connected to one another.

This figuring out how to stay connected is a top priority for everyone who follows Jesus. It requires soul tending: paying attention to that special invisible body part that all of us have. Luke writes in his gospel that the disciples returned to Jerusalem after the ascension with “great joy”, and that they stayed continually at the temple praising God. In Acts he tells us that the followers of Jesus—the eleven remaining disciples plus about one hundred others—joined together constantly in prayer. The gospel of Luke focuses on the joy of celebration; the book of Acts focuses on the business of transition. The gospel of Luke emphasizes praise; the book of Acts emphasizes prayer. Jesus has promised the disciples they would be his witnesses of the gospel in all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. But before they can go out and do any of that, they need to stay home and wait.

But they didn’t wait in a passive way. They waited in an active way. They met together. They worshipped. They prayed. They continued to reflect on all Jesus had taught them and kept their hearts open so they could receive the gift Jesus had for them next. They spent time caring for their souls.

Have you ever felt Jesus telling you to wait? To stand still, stay close to him, and wait? Last week we talked about Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, and how we are all called to wash each other’s feet. We said that being a servant is at the heart of being a disciple.

But we are not designed to serve 24/7. Mary and Martha were both excited to have Jesus as a guest in their home. Martha showed that excitement by cooking and cleaning and being the hostess with the most-est, while Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his teaching. Serving is important, Jesus said. But so is sitting still and listening!

While pastoring at my first church, the local clergy got to talking about this paradox at one of our ministerium meetings. Being a pastor involves a lot of serving, going out and doing for God, which is exciting—but also tiring. No one can do all that serving without taking time for prayer and study and being still. I was having a hard time finding a balance.

That’s when I heard about do-be-do-be-do rhythm of spirituality. Do-be-do-be-do sounds like a song from Frank Sinatra, but it’s also a great way to think about our faith. God calls us to DO. There is absolutely no doubt about that. To go, feed, clothe, serve, etc. But God also calls us to BE. To stop, and wait, and listen.

This do-be-do-be-do rhythm is so important to God, God even made it one of the Ten Commandments. Six days we are to work; the seventh day is for rest. Stop. Listen. Reconnect. Experience recreation, re-creation. We are designed and commanded to be do-be-do-be-do people! Without taking time to BE, we can’t expect to be able to DO those things God most wants us to do.

This rhythm is important for just not just as individuals, but as a church. We gather for worship on Sundays as an expression of our desire to BE. We come in order to get

reconnected to God, to be reminded of who we are, to get rested up and equipped so that we can then get out and DO. That is our weekly pattern. But there is also a yearly pattern. We know the season of Lent is a time to pull inward, and for us to pay special attention to our souls and our connection to God. In general, summer is another season of re-creation. Often it means lighter schedules, going on a vacation, or enjoying good weather. All things to help us BE, to help us reconnect to God and be reminded of, and transformed into, who God wants us to be.

This summer Lima Church will once again enter into a sort of Sabbath rhythm: no choir rehearsal, no adult Tuesday night Bible study, fewer weekly meetings. We do this every year. But this year, we are also going to try, for the month of July, just having one service each Sunday morning at 10 am. Church Council voted to do this for several reasons. Because we normally have three morning worship services, Lima Church people don't all know each other. Meeting together for a month will hopefully help us connect with people who usually worship at different times. Our praise band is all volunteer except for the director, Edda. Only having one service in July will give them all a much-deserved month off. But since music is so important to this church, one service allows us to bring in special guests each week to bless us with their unique witness.

The second thing I want to highlight is the Reconciling Ministry team. You may have heard me mention that there is a group of about 20 people meeting every two weeks, with the focus of helping the Lima Church adopt a statement of inclusion and affirmation of people with differing sexual orientations. We are already "welcoming". But there is a great deal of energy in our congregation around wanting to make it clear where we as a congregation stand.

The Reconciling Team decided to spend the summer, devoting our time to prayer and study. Everyone is welcome to attend the meetings. We are using curriculum that centers on the idea of being bridge-builders, how to connect the church to the world, and how to connect people of various opinions in the church to each other through our mutual connection to God. We are also learning more about human sexuality in general, and on Tuesday, June 18th, we are having a workshop presented by a Penn State Brandywine instructor. We are meeting with a particular actionable goal in mind. But for the summer, we are devoting ourselves to prayer and study, awaiting further instructions from the Lord.

This Do-Be-Do-Be-Do rhythm gets played out in many ways in us and our church, and it is a huge part of all church tradition. This week I read about an ancient church father, Anthony of Egypt, who lived from 251 to 356, that's right almost 106 years. He was raised in a wealthy Christian family but as a young man felt God speaking directly to his heart, telling him to see his possessions and give the money to the poor. So he did. He embarked on a life of solitude in the Egyptian desert, not just for a few days or weeks away, but he lived there for 20 years! "He renounced all his possessions to learn detachment; he renounced speech in order to learn compassion; and he renounced activity in order to learn prayer." (Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Daily Office, p. 46) When Anthony emerged from his solitude, he was transformed. People remarked that he was whole in body, mind, and soul. God used him to cast out demons, care for prisoners, and

even provide spiritual counsel to Emperor Constantine! Anthony emerged from his time of solitude ready and able to build bridges with everyone in his midst.

After the Ascension, the disciples waited ten days in Jerusalem before Pentecost, and they used that time well. They emerged from that time ready to be witnesses for Christ. Which meant that, for all but one of them, they emerged ready to be martyrs for Christ. John lived to be an old man, but he spent the last part of his life in exile on the island of Patmos, as punishment for being a Christian. All of the other disciples, church tradition tell us, were killed for their faith. The Greek word for witness and martyr are one and the same.

Where do you see yourself in the rhythm of discipleship? Are you getting the do-be-do-be-do balance just right? We can't be effective witnesses without attending to our own souls. We can't be disciples without the Divine. We are all called to be servants. But there are times when God calls us to stop and wait, to listen for further instructions, to be reminded of who we are. How will you commit to caring for your soul this summer? Amen.