

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 24, 2020
Ms. Mary Hinkle
Church of the Holy Cross

Come, Holy Spirit

Are you a covidiot? Or are you a coward, “living in fear of a little virus?” Is your motto “Stay home and stay safe?” Or do you chant “Give us our liberty?” Do you have a collection of colorful fabric masks, or do you sneer at those who wear them? Do you give more weight to the pronouncements of scientists, or do you listen to voices calling the pandemic reaction overblown?

The novel coronavirus has fractured our society, our communities, along new lines of division, giving us fresh topics to disagree about: social distancing, virus testing, vaccines, the economic consequences of lockdowns, the collisions between our individual rights and our collective responsibility toward each other. And it has deepened longstanding dividing lines: race, gender, sexual orientation, income, economic wellbeing, education level, employment status, partisanship, citizenship, religion. I’m probably forgetting others. On every possible fault line, the tone today is extremist at each end; we have to choose between A and Z, because all other points of the spectrum have vanished. Every choice seems to be presented as yes/no, black/white, for/against, with no room for nuance or moderation or seeing other sides. And all this stuff is swirling around us, all day, every day, everywhere we go. The only possible escape would be to cut oneself off completely from all sources of information, from respectable news media to scurrilous tweets and social media clickbait.

And that’s the sad, sorry mindset that I brought to today’s Scripture readings. That’s probably the reason that, when I imagined myself standing alongside the disciples in these two accounts of Jesus’ ascension to heaven, I was unable to feel awe, elation, and wonder; instead, I imagined the disciples feeling loss, bewilderment, perhaps even despair. Jesus has already turned their lives upside down twice—in calling them to drop everything and follow him and then in his death and resurrection—and now he has left them alone to wait for a promised Holy Spirit, a “power from on high.” Surely they are thinking, “What do we do now?” And I’m not alone in this notion; even before our current circumstances, there were cartoons expressing this very idea.

But Luke tells us that the disciples were filled with great joy and returned to the Temple in Jerusalem to praise God. And we know that they continued to carry out Christ’s mission, despite the feeling that their world had turned upside down. How did they do this? Perhaps they realized, as the Rev. Rob Fisher of St. John’s Lafayette Square put it recently, that Jesus, by ascending, had empowered them to take up and carry out their ministry.

As God empowered the first disciples, so has God empowered us. We know what we are called to do, and we have tried, with God’s help, to live into that call. But as we find ourselves now with our world turned upside down, at least some of us wonder whether we need to change what we do, to discern and pursue our call differently than we did just a few months ago.

My answer to that question is “no and yes.” Our readings remind us that Christ’s followers endured suffering, change, and uncertainty yet continued to bear witness, to carry the good news of redemption into the world. For us as well, the fundamental things apply; we must continue to follow Jesus, as Br. Jim Woodrum of the Society of St. James the Evangelist recently put it, “by teaching and healing, by listening to our neighbors, and by doing acts of love and mercy even in the face of those who wish us ill.”

At the same time, I think our current situation is an opportunity to take a hard look at our words, works, and attitudes, to ask ourselves some tough questions. Are we preventing or inviting misunderstandings? Are we acting with humility or arrogance? Do we do more listening or talking? Do we have open minds,

or do we assume we're always correct? Do we uphold and defend our values in ways that respect others, or do we pass judgment on them? Are we acting in ways that include others or that shut them out? What impression would a stranger have of each of us, or of our Holy Cross community, if he overheard our conversations, read our social media posts, or examined our ministries?

In her Tuesday e-mail meditation and her remarks at our online gathering that evening, Jamie talked about how praying for others changes her attitude toward them. I suggest that we also need to pray for ourselves, asking directly for God's help in discerning the answers to the questions I just mentioned—and for God's mercy in forgiving us where we have not done our best. We don't even have to come up with our own words; we can follow the author of the letter to the Ephesians, asking God to give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, to enlighten the eyes of our hearts. We can also find appropriate words in our Book of Common Prayer. In the Ash Wednesday Litany of Penitence (p. 268), for example, we pray:

Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty; for all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and for our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us.

The Prayer for the Human Family (p. 815) says:

Oh God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth.

And the Prayer for our Enemies (p. 816) makes a similar plea:

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you.

I suspect our world will never return to what we perceived as right-side up. But we have been empowered forever, under any and all conditions, by the Ascension and the Holy Spirit. Let us seek to do our work through the fruits of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—as we step out to follow Jesus' way. Amen.

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53