

E7 2023 Acts 1:6-14 & John 17:1-11

The Dear Abby advice genre has transitioned remarkably well to social media because the internet is full of people who think the whole world wants to hear their opinions on everything. But whereas the newspaper had one Dear Abby, as well as someone screening the letters, the internet has virtually no limit on who can ask and who can answer. For example, a woman writes:

My husband loves to travel and always either pays for, or gets an upgrade into, the first-class cabin. When we travel together {together} with our children, he buys himself a ticket in first class and puts us in economy or economy plus. He did this recently on an overnight flight to Paris. He justifies flying alone in first class because of the cost, and the fact that our kids (age 12 and 16) might feel alone if I were to travel in first class with him and leave them in the rear cabin. I feel that this is unfair.

She goes on:

I don't think our kids would mind if they were in economy plus and my husband and I sat together in first class. Is that unfair? My husband has suggested he could travel alone on a different flight ahead of us so that we don't feel badly about the disparity, but this doesn't really solve the problem. Am I wrong?

If ever you doubt that the Holy Spirit is at work in your pastor, know that I did not share my opinion on the internet. But if I did, what I would say is that mom getting herself into first class while leaving the kids in steerage is still missing the point, as is dad still flying first class but on a different flight. You're still not seeing the big picture, folks; you're still thinking too small. And that's the disciples in the Acts reading today: thinking too small, not seeing the big picture, missing the point.

Technically the Ascension happened on our liturgical calendar last Thursday, always on a Thursday, always 40 days after Easter, according to the timeline Luke shares at the beginning of Acts. The number 40 recalls the 40 days Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and the 40 years the Israelites wandered to get into the Promised Land; so that probably explains the timing of Jesus' ascent to heaven. Or he just couldn't take one more question from the clueless disciples who still hadn't figured out what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were about. They ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" as if the whole point of Jesus' ministry was to accomplish the political goal of usurping Herod's throne. During his temptation, the devil had offered Jesus political power over all the governments of the world, and Jesus said no. The crowds whom he had miraculously fed tried to make Jesus king by force, and he ran away from them. On Palm Sunday he mocks Rome's political pomp and circumstance by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey instead of a war horse. And he dies wearing a crown of thorns underneath a sign that says *King of the Jews*...yet still, the best the disciples can imagine is Jesus establishing a theocracy in first century Palestine. And they're getting impatient; they think Jesus should have chosen a cabinet by now and that, as Jesus' inner circle, they should be picking out offices in the palace.

Jesus spent three years with the disciples showing them what the kingdom of God is supposed to look like. At no point did he teach them that the fullness of God's kingdom would come when he, and by extension they, won a political victory and took over the government. The world wasn't going to be transformed by the head of one state enforcing the law, even if it was God's law. The world—to the ends of the earth, Jesus says—would be transformed by the witness of the disciples, by the disciples teaching what Jesus taught, by them living the way of life that Jesus had lived with them. The disciples were still waiting for Jesus to inaugurate the kingdom of God with a big political move; they had missed that he had already revealed what it meant to live in the kingdom: to love, to serve, to forgive, to make peace, to practice justice.

Today's reading from John's gospel shows that instead of looking up, the disciples should have been looking around—looking around for ways to serve each other like Jesus had served them in the years he spent with them modeling God's life. This scene in John's gospel takes us back to Jesus' last night with the disciples before his arrest. They overhear him praying to the Father, saying, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do." What glorified God, what pointed to God's glory, was the healing, feeding, freeing, forgiving, and serving that Jesus spent his whole life doing. He wasn't saying his crucifixion had glorified God; that hadn't happened yet. He wasn't even saying his resurrection had glorified God, because that hadn't happened yet, either. The life of selfless loving service, symbolized by Jesus washing the disciples' feet just prior to them denying, betraying, and abandoning him: that is what the beginning of eternal life in the kingdom of God looks like. Jesus petitions the Father to give the disciples strength and protection as they mirror his way and promises to send them the Holy Spirit to empower them for that kingdom living.

The disciples watch Jesus ascend to heaven and just keep looking up, like they expect him to float back down at any moment. I don't know what they thought he was going to do up there that was going to get done so fast that he'd come right back while they were still watching. But the two men in white robes—the same two who were outside the empty tomb, maybe? Moses and Elijah again like at the Transfiguration, maybe? —these two redirect the disciples' attention: *You can't keep looking for him up there or you'll miss him down here.* Had the men in white not come along to help them out, the disciples might have stood there forever, waiting for Jesus to return triumphantly as king, while what Jesus had commissioned them to do was to start living like citizens of God's kingdom on earth, to be living witnesses to Jesus' compassion and mercy, striving for justice, working for peace.

The disciples were waiting for Jesus to become king of Israel, just for them, in their time and place; they were thinking too small. The kingdom of God is a much bigger picture—The Big Picture, inclusive of all people, in every time and place. We are called to live into that kingdom now, in the life that is all around us. May we not think too small; we don't want to miss it.