

“Mission to Accomplish”
Acts 1: 1-11

The story is told about a couple who came to see a pastor with regard to joining the church. He was excited about it until he felt the conversation turn into an interview. The couple wanted to know just what Second Presbyterian Church was going to do for them and for their children. What kind of youth program were they offering and how many children's activities do they have a month and if they had a computer lab for the children. The pastor brought them to sudden silence by asking, "What are you planning to do for Second Presbyterian Church?" Soon they left, never to be seen again.

Unfortunately, we sometimes look at faith as a matter of having God serve us and fulfill all of our needs in a way that we become the customers and God the service provider. The greatest challenge to this kind of outlook on faith is that it never produces disciples, it only produces clients. It does not allow us to reach our potential in service and love because we get stuck on feeding our preferences and wants. It is also quite contrary to the biblical witness of God's relationship with humanity.

Today's Bible story from the book of Acts shows us the kind of call the early disciples received. At its heart, the Ascension story of Jesus Christ, was a story of mission and commission. According to the author of the book of Acts, Jesus continued to appear to the disciples after his death and resurrection for 40 days and on the 40th day it was time for Jesus to say his final goodbye. To our modern minds there are a couple of common reactions to this story. First, for those of us who are totally uncomfortable with anything supernatural, we may choose to skip over this story. This is exactly what President Thomas Jefferson did with his edited version of the Gospels. The second reaction, for those of us who like to think about the supernatural power of Jesus would be to make the focus of the story be on the miracle of seeing Jesus ascending into heaven as a proof text to his divinity. Unfortunately, both reactions miss the point of the story. Today I would like to invite us to think about how the author of the book of Acts might have seen this story and what it might have also meant to the disciples in their own cultural context. The number 40 in the Bible and that culture was and is a significant number. When important things happened over a long period of time, the reference was often to 40 years or days. "Forty days and forty nights" describes the period for which rain fell during Noah's flood. "Forty days" was the length of the period that the twelve spies explored the Promised Land (Numbers 13). "Forty years" was the length of Israel's wandering in the wilderness. Moses' life is divided into three 40-year segments, separated by his fleeing from Egypt, and his return to lead the people out. Several Israelite leaders and kings are said to have ruled for "forty years", that is, a generation. Jesus himself fasted for 40 days.

Also, in that culture the 40 days after death were seen as part of the spiritual journey of the soul. Growing up in the Middle East, I remember my grandmother telling me about why people have appearances of their loved ones who died. These forty days were considered a part of their ascent to heaven where the soul is going back and forth between heaven and earth. So, for forty days, the friends and family of a dead one are invited to pray for him/her. In fact, till this day, in Syria in Orthodox and Catholic churches a memorial service is held on the 40th day after death to mark the journey of the soul.

So, with the end of that period of 40 days of Jesus' appearances to the disciples, this was the end of Jesus' physical presence with them and the beginning of their continued mission without him. The topic of his conversation with them was "the kingdom of God". Jesus did not talk of himself nor of his resurrection nor even of the future of the church. He talked with them about

the kingdom of God. Because that was, according to the author of Luke and Acts, Jesus' entire focus. If the Gospel of Luke is about anything, it is about Jesus' teaching, working for and even dying for the kingdom of God. And that theme is carried over and dominates Luke's account of the work of the apostles after Jesus' ascension, as it appears in the book of Acts.

The Ascension of Jesus Christ marked the end of their grieving period which was the traditional period of 40 days. It also marked the beginning of looking forward. There was a tendency in the early church to focus so much on the return of Jesus being so imminent and forgetting about the mission work of the kingdom of God. That is why it was important for the author of Acts to help people focus on the mission of Christ instead of his second coming. After this experience, we are told about how the disciples healed the sick and raised the dead. They died forgiving those who killed them (as Stephen did) and they endured much of the same treatment as Jesus. They continued the ministry of Jesus of building up the kingdom of God.

In Luke, the first part of the story of Acts, Jesus is committed to the bringing in of the kingdom of God. This kingdom will bring in its wake a grand reversal in which poverty and systems of domination will be eliminated and humanity will become all that God intended it to be. This reversal will occur through the intervention of Jesus as the one bringing about jubilee, which was a biblical mandate to forgive debts and free slaves every 50 years. Through his life and ministry, his empowering of people, his confrontation of the systems, his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus will set the stage for the resurrection of humanity into the world as God intended. So, the invitation to the disciples, the community of the early church and to us today is not to stay focused on gazing at the sky and to wait for God to do things for us. The invitation is to join in God's mission in the world of service, justice and love. Ascension Sunday is not about looking up but about looking around us to see how God is calling us to love and to serve.

Today, we are invited by the mission committee to do something in the spirit of Christ's work for building up the kingdom of God. We have the opportunity to write letters that support the reform of our foreign aid assistance programs. What does this have to do with our faith in Christ? One of the key elements in continuing the building up of the kingdom of God is the ministry of advocacy for the poor in our own country and around the world. Working for justice requires charity, advocacy, and solidarity. This is the biblical witness of the prophets who not only did deeds of mercy and charity, but also spoke truth to power and advocated for justice, especially for the poor and oppressed. It was not enough for them to give food to the hungry but also to eliminate the practices that made that person poor in the first place.

A few years ago I served on an advocacy committee for women's issues in the church and in the world. That was an eye opening experience for me as to how so many things in our systems unintentionally oppress people, especially the poor. Today, I am also a member of the Advocacy Committee of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley. At first blush, it is not easy to see the connection between our faith and advocacy for the poor and oppressed. However, if we take the ascension of Jesus seriously as well as his ministry, we have no choice but to work for justice through advocacy. It is not enough to do deeds of charity. We are called to the prophetic ministry of Christ where we confront and change any systems that oppress God's creation. I encourage you today to stop by the parlor and take the time to write a letter and say a prayer for those who suffer in our world day in and day out.

Dorothy Day is someone that took the message of the gospel about justice very seriously in her life. I would like to share a part of her story with you today in the first person.

"My name is Dorothy Day. I was born in Brooklyn in 1897, and was raised mostly in Chicago. In 1916, my family moved to New York City and I went with them, to pursue a career as a journalist. I got involved in the hot-button issues of the day: women's rights and birth control. Later on, I found faith in Jesus Christ through the Catholic Church and decided to dedicate my life to God. As a result I had to end my relationship with the father of my child who was a committed atheist. My faith in Jesus Christ also led me to follow the way of the cross. "I loved the church, but I was also aware that the Church didn't always live according to the way of the cross. I was aware of the businesslike priests, of collective wealth, the lack of a sense of responsibility for the poor and oppressed. There was plenty of charity in the church but too little justice. People liked to give money to help support homeless shelters or soup kitchens, but not many were dedicated to dealing the causes of homelessness or poverty. That is why I started a movement in the church to seek justice. The majority of priests and church people looked down on me as a leftist radical, but the faith I knew led me to believe that Christ was about this radical way of love. I found many Christians around me afraid of the struggle for social and racial justice. The old song, "You'll get pie in the sky when you die," was too often the comfort of the Christian. And we do nothing, or do little, and leave the rest up to God. I know that we can do little, but we must resolve to do all.

I started publishing the Catholic Worker in May, 1933, with a first issue of 2,500 copies ... By the end of the year we had a circulation of 100,000 and by 1936 it was 150,000. In addition to the paper, I opened a "House of Hospitality" in the slums of New York. Its purpose was to carry out those works that sound like such a good idea in theory; housing the homeless and feeding the hungry." There were several families with us, destitute families, destitute to an unbelievable extent, and there, too, was nothing to do but to love. What I mean is that there was no chance of rehabilitation, no chance, so far as we see, of changing them; certainly no chance of adjusting them to this abominable world about them -- and who wanted them adjusted, anyway?" I lived a life of poverty and hard work. Many might have looked down on my accomplishments because I didn't have much. However, I know that this was my Christian calling to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with my God."

May the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, the witness of the disciples from Peter, Dorothy Day to the saints of this church, inspire us to continue to build up the kingdom of God so that peace, justice and love may prevail in our world. Amen.