

In another sign that life has not returned to normal, tomorrow, May 17th is tax day rather than the usual April 15th. Now on this day we recognize our graduates, I would guess that for tax purposes anyway, each of you are still considered dependents — that is, you are still an individual that relies on another person for most of your financial support. And of course, there's nothing wrong with that; in fact, it is to be expected. Now I only bring up this idea of being a dependent because of the readings that we heard today. But in our readings, there's a different kind of dependence/independence dynamic at work. And that's what I would like us to focus on today.

To begin, let's first look at our reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The book is addressed to Theophilus, a name that literally means one who is "dear to God." So, while that may be a particular individual, it seems more likely that the book is meant for any reader, like you and me, who are considered a dear friend of God's. Now, the author Luke, (who is the same person as the Gospel writer that bears his name), does a very brief summation of his gospel. That book was about "all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen."

Luke also shares that "After his sufferings he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." I find it interesting to look at this summary through the lens of dependence/independence. During the time that Jesus is acting and teaching, and even through the time of his sufferings and appearances after his resurrection, I think of Jesus' disciples as being highly dependent on him and his leadership. Jesus is the one calling the shots and they are following his lead to the best of their ability.

But as we say, "All good things must come to an end." Because in verse four, while Jesus is still staying with them, even so, a clear shift occurs. Jesus orders them to do something in the very near future. He tells them, "not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father." Now why would he do this unless he was leaving them? He

explains that “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Quite clearly, the disciples do not seem to be picking up what Jesus is putting down. This is a farewell discourse; he’s leaving and they are going to have to grow up and learn to be more independent. It’s kind of like Jesus is giving them a speech at their graduation, and they are like, “Huh?”

We know this because when they come together, they ask Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They are imagining that things are just about to ramp up with Jesus leading the way, not that they are winding down. They are hoping that it’s finally time to kick some brutal and unjust Roman-you-know-what out of Israel and re-establish the dominion that was long ago enjoyed by King David. The disciples were hoping for some political and military-type of insurrection and Jesus must just be shaking his head in disbelief. Fortunately for the disciples, Jesus doesn’t get all up their business for being so terribly wrong. He just deflects their nationalistic fervor with a couple of statements. Listen to how Jesus’ response comes across in *The Message*, a loose translation of the Bible:

“He told them, ‘You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business. What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.’”

Don’t you just love that? Those are Jesus’ last recorded words with his disciples. They are so insightful and profound. It’s like a favorite teacher who might speak at your graduation or what a coach or the principal or your parents or grandparents might say. “You are going to do great things. I don’t doubt that. But don’t get out too far out over your skis or you’ll soon be tumbling down the hill. Ultimately, God’s the one in charge. And though I won’t any longer be physically there every day, you got this. Why can I be so sure? Because I am sending you the gift of the Holy Spirit. And I know that you together with the Holy Spirit, that’s going to create something amazing — the ability for each of you to be my witness, right here, out there, and everywhere you go.”

And with that, our story in Acts relates that, “When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” We call this event Jesus’ Ascension but it is also ours... in a different sense of the word. Because this is our move from dependence to independence. We ascend or we might say that we graduate into a new role. With Jesus physically gone, there seems to be a few moments of holy fear for the disciples. Like, “Holy... [Cow] did that really just happen? Did Jesus just leave like that?” But just as Jesus promised, they are not left alone with no help, no clue, no direction because suddenly two men appear — in white robes no less(!) to tell them that it’s true. Jesus has gone but he isn’t gone forever. He will come again one day.

So wisely, the disciples heed Jesus’ words and return to Jerusalem, and they immediately gather with their fellow believers in their faith community. And once they have gathered, both the men and women leaders, what do they do? They first devote themselves to prayer. And, were we to continue reading, we would hear that they proceeded to raise up additional leaders. And that is something that I have seen frequently appreciated about each of these seniors (and soon to be graduates). I feel as though you have been taught well — by your parents and grandparents, by your teachers, by your church, and by so many others in this community. You are amazingly gifted individuals who have grown into leaders but you also recognize that you are not called on to do everything on your own. Whether in sports or in a musical or in the band or a choir or at work or on a mission trip or wherever you may go, you know that for things to work well, you need to act and lead with a community of others.

So with that, I want to turn briefly to our other lesson today, from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia. Here too, there’s a question about what (or who) are we to be dependent on and what are we independent from. Paul starts out the chapter by calling them foolish Galatians. Because he was the one who started this church he’s pretty furious that what he taught them and what they experienced when he was with them is now being thrown out entirely. It’s like if, as seniors, some years from now a favorite

teacher or a coach saw you acting in all kinds of ways that were completely contrary to what you had been taught — and it was doing you tremendous harm.

Paul is telling them that they were given the Holy Spirit and with that, the gift of faith. That was great and clearly it was all that was needed, because the Spirit was working miracles among them. Paul says that they had it all, just like Abraham who “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” So if you were living under the grace of God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit by faith in Jesus Christ, and were being so richly blessed, why then are you abandoning what was working for something that won’t work? It’s sheer craziness! What is the point of rejecting the new things that God is doing and trying to go back to the old practices? Can we ever feel free and complete in God by doing the works of the Law? No! Only by our faithfulness to Jesus, the One who secures our salvation, will we feel that unity and the fullness of belonging.

Baptism is the sign that we belong to Christ. This means that Jesus’ faithfulness to God and God’s will becomes ours, fully and completely. Paul speaks of this as having “clothed yourselves with Christ.” So we are no longer meant to function as autonomous individuals separated along party lines. Our identity is no longer to be informed and governed by those things that separate us from one another. In Paul’s day, some of the biggies that separated people were Jew as opposed to Greek, slave as opposed to free, male as opposed to female. But just as those distinctions about whose better and whose lesser completely dissolve under Christ, so do our foolish categories of straight and gay, red and blue, urban and rural, along with any and all of the rest. Because as Paul says, “For all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

So as those who belong to Christ, let’s live as *dependent* on faith and *independent* of what divides us. For as we hear Paul state it so succinctly in verse 26, “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” Amen

Narrative.3 Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29 & Acts 1:1-14 May 16, 2021 Pastor Jonathan Zielske