

A Reflection on Acts 1:6-14 for Easter 7

When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

The Apostles and maybe a few fellow travelers stood on a Palestinian hillside and watched in amazement as their teacher, their mentor, their leader, disappeared into the clouds.

Richard Mixon writes in *Feasting on the Word*, “One would think that by now they might have grown beyond amazement at the course their life had taken since they had met Jesus in Galilee. “ He continues, “perhaps it is true that wonders never cease. So, after being chided by two men in white robes for standing there looking up toward heaven, they returned to Jerusalem to wait as they had been instructed, to see what amazing things would happen next.”

These men and women were real human beings, with names and histories, with hopes and uncertainties. They had followed Jesus and now they waited for the Holy Spirit to come, not really knowing what that meant, not really knowing what to expect or how their lives would be changed. It is these men and women made up the first church.

Though the times have changed radically, it is still real men and women with names and histories and with hopes and uncertainties, who make up the faithful today. The ones who gather to pray, to wait, to listen. And then, like the disciples gathered in the room, to go forth to spread the good news. To offer hope, healing and God’s love, God’s mercy and delight.

William Willimon, in his study on the Book of Acts, writes, “our waiting and praying indicate that the gift of the Spirit is never an assured possession of the church. The Spirit is a gift, a gift which must be constantly sought anew in prayer. Prayer for understanding, wisdom, guidance, and strength to go forward. Prayers offered in hope and fear, in faith and in doubt, in obedience and wonder.”

The disciples – followers, loved ones, apostles, men and women, gathered in the upper room, perhaps the same one where Jesus washed their feet and shared what we call, the last supper. Perhaps it was the one where he mysteriously appeared though the doors were barred. Perhaps the same one where Thomas touches him to really believe.

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What we know is they gathered together waiting for the Holy Spirit and praying. We know it has been 40 days since the resurrection. Jesus has told them to remain in Jerusalem, to wait for the promise of his Father -- baptism by the Holy Spirit.

Forty days in which Jesus has appeared, has walked with disciples, has broken bread, has taught them. In scripture, the number 40 almost always suggests a period of formation. A time of being prepared, of learning and discerning. And it is a time of being corrected, being set right on the path of discipleship.

The number forty can recall for us, as it would have Jesus' followers, Noah and the ark's forty days and nights on the water as God prepared the world to begin again. As God again defined what it meant to live in his creation. The number forty can recall for us, as it would have Jesus' followers, Israel's forty years in the wilderness, where the Israelites wandered being led by God by smoke and fire and fed by God with manna and water. In this time, Israel was being formed as God's people – formed in sacred relationship. The number forty might remind us, as it would have Jesus' followers, of Jesus' forty days and nights in the wilderness, as Jesus faced temptation and choice – choice to follow God or to follow Satan and the ways of the world.

It is in this understanding of forty that those hearing the words from Acts, would hear that the 40 days that Jesus was with the disciples following his resurrection had a deeper meaning. They would know that Jesus' followers were being prepared for the journey ahead – the journey to take God's love for all that he created. The journey to take all that was expressed in son Jesus Christ's life and death, resurrection and ascension, out to the world.

These forty days were for preparing the disciples, the followers to be evangelists so they could go forth and be witnesses to the ends of the earth. But to do this, the disciples would need formation, a time of preparation. And, they would need to be grounded in community and communal prayer. The same is true today. We as disciples need our forty days – our days of preparation, our days of formation, our days of prayer in community.

In scripture, forty isn't really about a number but about a process – a process that is on-going. Just as the disciples in Jesus' time needed those days following the resurrection to be steeped in faith, to have the teachings of Jesus be knit deep into their bones, so do we. We too need to be formed, to be molded into the body of Christ. Just like the disciples, we must be willing to be formed through being taught, through being corrected when thinking goes astray, through prayer and through sitting with Jesus.

All too often we just assume we are formed through some kind of osmosis. Kind of like putting a language tape under one's pillow and thinking one will learn the language. We may assume that our formation has occurred somewhere, somehow, sometime in the past and further formation is no longer needed.

We may think, we learned what we needed in Sunday school those many years ago. But that is far from the truth. Being formed as a discipline is lifelong. It requires commitment and intentionality. It requires a willingness to offer our heart and minds to God and allow God to work within us. It requires a willingness to be changed by God, to be truly transformed.

Just as the disciples then, today and every day, we are experiencing God's call to be disciples, to be followers, to be witnesses of Jesus to the ends of the world. But for us to be disciples and witnesses, we must be formed through learning and through prayer. Formed through relationship with God and with community. It is only through this that we can offer to this broken world God's abundant and life-giving hope and love that can only be known through faith and community, through Jesus Christ and the Holy

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Spirit. May you embrace the same courage that the disciples then embraced to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.