

Head Down, Zip It, Do It! Acts 1:1-11

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV Ascension Sunday (May 17) 2015

¹ In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Immediately AFTER the scripture has been read, two women deemed by the Worship Committee to be two of the holiest people in the congregation, stand up and say: FRIENDS OF JESUS, WHY ARE YOU STANDING THERE WITH STIFF NECKS LOOKING INTO HEAVEN. YOU HEARD WHAT JESUS SAID. GET TO WORK!

This Season of Easter, we have been focusing on the IMAGES OF JESUS.

- Jesus laughing,
- Jesus' full humanity,
- Jesus being compassionate as a Shepherd,
- Jesus' baptism,
- Jesus as a Friend.

All images of Jesus in relationship here on earth – following that amazing conquest of death called the Resurrection.

And, then, just as the disciples and we are starting to get comfortable with Jesus the man, albeit a resurrected man, among us, He takes off today in a way that would make Steven Spielberg envious of the special effects.

POOF! Up into the sky, in a cloud of puffy white. He's gone!

It's no wonder that the friends of Jesus stood there getting stiff necks

looking upward.

Sometimes, those outside the Church might be excused for thinking that we are still like those disciples – heads in the clouds, and no earthly good, except for passing words of judgment on all those who don't stand looking into the clouds in the same way as they do. That's the Church that some of them see. Not all folks know how it is at Saint Marks – not yet!

But the two heavenly beings – portrayed as angel messengers – come and give them the message that they are still giving to those claiming to be friends of Jesus:

FRIENDS OF JESUS, WHY ARE YOU STANDING THERE WITH STIFF NECKS LOOKING INTO HEAVEN. YOU HEARD WHAT JESUS SAID. GET TO WORK!

You see, my sisters and brothers, HERE is the nub, HERE is the meat of the matter, HERE is the ESSENCE OF THE GOSPEL:

Today, we were blessed to witness and to remember and to recovenant through the SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM. **Pierson Cook** came with his parents, not able to make a single vow, thus emphasizing that the primary work going on in Baptism is that of God. For it is in Baptism that God imprinted on him the WATERMARK of a HOLY NAME that will follow him from today through the grave: BELOVED CHILD OF GOD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD. That's HOLY WORK that God does. That's the awesome and lasting power of the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

But, at the same time this holy, kingdom work is accomplished by God, Pierson's parents and sponsors also came, making holy promises to Pierson, as they did earlier to his brother Trenton, that they will bring them both up in the church and surround them with EARTHLY EXAMPLES of what claiming the friendship of Jesus looks like. And not just Steven and Brittany, but we,

too, made those holy promises. And not just to Pierson, but to God: we will look after him and take responsibility, along with his parents and sponsors, for his proper upbringing. It takes a Village, and we – all of us here, who participated in this – agreed to be that village.

But, wait! There's more.

When we are reminded by Jesus' Words, at His Ascension, of the Sacrament of Baptism – (parenthetical note: at Jesus' takeoff in Matthew, the commission He gives the disciples there is also about Baptism!) – we are also reminded of what Jesus was all about from the very beginning of His ministry.

In Jesus' very first sermon, the Gospels tell us (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; cf. Luke 4:21) ***THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.***

And throughout His ministry, that is the underlying message of all Jesus' teaching. That is the meaning of all His miracles: ***THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.***

I confess that the notion came to me during Centering Prayer, and I told you about that Vision in a sermon one August Sunday morning a couple of years ago. But it is a Vision that for me, and I hope for you, embodies this whole important message of Jesus' preaching, teaching, living, healing, miracle working, death, and life: ***THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.***

You will find attached to your bulletin, on the tear off tab, that Vision which was given me. I have one on the very front of my desk in my office, laying right across the base of the desktop miniature Homeless Jesus statue. It's a ***ZIPPER.***

Look at that zipper in your bulletin. Move the slide up and down. Do you feel the – what we call – “teeth” on which the slide moves, and draws together?

The teeth on one side represent the Kingdom of Five Senses – the world in which we experience through our sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Some people make the mistake of believing that that is the only real world. They don't understand what Jesus said: **THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.**

The teeth on the other side of the zipper represent that **KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.** It is at hand, right now, all around us. It is the power that watermarks Pierson with a name BELOVED CHILD OF GOD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD, like it baptized every other baptized child of God.

It is the power that transcends what we hear in music to what we feel in the depths of our soul.

It is the power that continually is available to move us, to shape us, and to empower us to do what Jesus commanded His friends to do after His departure.

Some who claim Jesus' name want to spend all their time just gazing into heaven looking for the Kingdom. Don't be stiff necked. It's not [UP] THERE; it's RIGHT HERE in our midst. Be in touch with it.

Be like Jesus, whose name we claim as CHRISTIANS. Jesus spent His whole life demonstrating – being the "SLIDE" on the zipper – joining the World of Five Senses with **THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND.**

Jesus said that once He was gone, that we will be empowered to do greater works that did He during His ministry. (John 14:12)

One of the things that I think we miss in the Good News is that WE, TOO can be miracle workers, when we join together the Kingdom of Five Senses and **THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND.**

And we can also do miracle works in simple things. We can join the ***THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND*** with the simple words of our lips.

Art Buchwald once wrote about an experience in New York City:

“I was in New York the other day and rode with a friend in a taxi. When we got out, my friend said to the driver, ‘Thank you for the ride. You did a superb job of driving.’

“The taxi driver was stunned for a second. Then he said, ‘Are you a wise guy or something?’

“No, my dear man, and I’m not putting you on. I admire the way you keep cool in heavy traffic.’

“Yeah,’ the driver said and drove off.

“What was that all about?’ [Buchwald asked.]

“I am trying to bring love back to New York,’ he said. ‘I believe it’s the only thing that can save the city.’

“How can one man save New York?’ [Buchwald pressed him.]

“It’s not one man. I believe I have made the taxi driver’s day. Suppose he has twenty fares. He’s going to be nice to those twenty fares because someone was nice to him. These fares in turn will be kinder to their employees or shopkeepers or waiters or even their own families. Eventually the goodwill could spread to at least 1,000 people. Now that isn’t bad, is it?’

“But you’re depending on that taxi driver to pass your goodwill to others.”

“I’m not depending on it,’ my friend said. ‘I’m aware that the system isn’t foolproof, so I might deal with ten different people today. If, out of ten, I can make three happy, then eventually, I can indirectly influence the attitudes of 3,000 more.’

“It sounds good on paper, [Buchwald] admitted. ‘but I’m not sure it works in practice.’

“Nothing is lost if it doesn’t. It didn’t take any of my time to tell that man he was doing a good job. He neither received a larger tip

nor a smaller tip. If it fell on deaf ears, so what? Tomorrow, there will be another taxi driver whom I can try to make happy.’

“You’re some kind of nut,’ [Art Buchwald accused.]

“That shows how cynical you have become ...’

[Buchwald continued to write:] We were walking past a structure in the process of being built and passed five workers eating their lunch. My friend stopped. ‘that’s a magnificent job you men have done. It must be difficult and dangerous work.’ The five men eyed my friend suspiciously.

‘When will it be finished?’ [he asked.]

“June,” a man grunted.

“Ah, that is really impressive. You must all be very proud.’

[Buchwald and his friend walked away, with Buchwald commenting,] ‘I haven’t seem anyone like you since “The Man of La Mancha.”’

“When those men digest my words, they will feel better for it. Somehow the city will benefit from their happiness.’

“But you can’t do this alone,’ [Buchwald] protested. ‘You’re just one man.’

“The most important thing is not to get discouraged. Making people in the city become kind again is not an easy job, but if I can enlist other people in my campaign’

“You just winked at a very plain looking woman,’ [Buchwald] said.

“Yes, I know,’ he replied. ‘And if she’s a school teacher, her class will be in for a fantastic day.’”¹

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND. We can be a part of it, in things simple and grand. This is the work that Jesus left us. **It’s not just about trying to “being nice;”** too many Christians think that it’s all up to them. It’s about tapping into the power of the Kingdom of Heaven.

¹ Joseph Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal* (New York: Harper, 1996) pp. 151-53

I talked to a member of this Church, who told me that when she was in her 80's, God revealed to her a new way to have conversations. She recognized **THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND**, and tried it out. In her next conversation, she listened and barely interrupted a woman who had many problems. When the conversation was over, the other woman said to her: ***“Thank you so much for allowing me to air out this problem. Everyone else wants to FIX ME. You allowed me to just talk about it, without feeling that you were FIXING ME. That is such a blessing.”***

The woman telling me the story said, **“You know. Before I listened to what God was telling me, I WOULD have tried to ‘fix her.’ But that is the way of the world. I finally – into my 9th generation – LISTENED TO GOD and did it His Way.”**

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND. And it can change our lives at any stage in our life. God still has work for Octogenarians and for children, and everyone in between.

Rod, I hope you don't mind me calling you out – You just finished a difficult thing in life called AN ELECTION. And your boss got reelected and you have a job for four more years. And yet, in the Facebook posting of the Charleston Gazette's story about your boss' reelection, lots of people wrote comments of a negative and very cruel type about your boss.

Y E T ... your job is to serve those nasty people with the same love as the people who supported your boss' campaign. That's not just good politics; that's not just being nice. You do it because **THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.** And you do it **WITH THAT POWER** at work in you.

We, Christians, aren't called to just be nice, or to be good. We are called to live and walk in two different kingdoms: the Kingdom of our Five

Senses (which is also called the world of common sense) as well as to live in ***THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, WHICH IS AT HAND.***

And here's the important part. It's not just a good idea. IT'S REQUIRED LIVING, if we are going to be ambassadors of God, if we choose the name CHRISTIAN.

FRIENDS OF JESUS, WHY ARE YOU STANDING THERE WITH STIFF NECKS LOOKING INTO HEAVEN. YOU HEARD WHAT JESUS SAID. HEAD DOWN, ZIP IT, DO IT!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.