

Waiting Together
Acts 1:4-5, 12-14; 2:1-4
Pentecost Sunday, (May 20) 2018
Kyle Childress

We pick up our story at the beginning of Acts where Sarah had us last week. Jesus is giving the disciples his last instructions before his departure, his ascension. Of course, they're figuring this is it. After three years of ministry, after the week in Jerusalem, after the terrible trial, torture, and execution on a cross, after his amazing resurrection, and after 40 days more of ministry and teaching – now this is finally *it*. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” (Acts. 1:6). “This is what we’ve been waiting for. Now, are you finally going to make Israel great again?”

After all of Jesus ministry, after all that he has done and said these disciples are still looking for the restoration of past glory to Israel. They still see their faith tied to bringing back the way it used to be.

We all see through our particular lens. And everything fits into our way of seeing the world. Even the teaching of Jesus Christ himself is not enough if all we see is through our particular lens. The question we’ll talk more about later is how our way of seeing can change.

So, we see our faith as a way to make America great again. Or to get us back to the “good old days” (whatever that might be) or get us back to when the hierarchy and pyramids were in place and we white males were at the top.

Of course, Jesus does not come to restore the old world. Jesus comes bringing in the kingdom of God – God’s revolutionary new creation.

I’m convinced that’s why Judas is like the White Evangelical Fundamentalist church in this country. When Jesus did not make Israel great again like Judas wanted him to, Judas became frustrated and went to those with political power (Pilate, Herod, and the High Priest) looking to them to force Jesus to make us great again.

Do you see what’s going on with the disciples’ question of Jesus? Now at the same time there is more to this. As you’ve heard me say multiple times, Scripture has a thickness of meaning.

Kate Bowler is a young professor at Duke Divinity School who has written a terrific new book called, *Everything Happens for a Reason And Other Lies I’ve Loved*. She says she was a brand-new PhD with a job at her first choice university divinity school. She had already had one book published, had a very good marriage, and a two year-old son whom she adored. She was having what she and the doctors thought was gall bladder problems when she got the call in her office that it was cancer. It was cancer and she needed to come to Duke Medical Center immediately. Meaning right now. This minute. Bowler writes of how her life changed after that. Everything changed.

She said, “I don’t think I knew enough about longing ten years ago... I had just bought a little house with the man I love – filled it with books, IKEA furniture, and a soft dog with stout legs. I was steeped in the lore of eternal youth. My life was something I could mold, or at least correct with a surge of determination...

Nothing was broken yet that could not be fixed..." [I had no understanding what] "longing for restoration" looked like (p. xvii). She goes on later to talk about how many nights she spent in the hospital longing for restoration of her old life. Longing for certainty. Longing for the old routines, the old comforts, and longing to be able to make plans. After cancer everything changed.

So when the disciples are asking Jesus, "Are you now going to restore the kingdom of Israel," the question is "Will you make Israel great again" but it can also be us asking, "Oh, God, when will you restore my old body? Please make me healthy again?" "Lord, please make my family strong again. Please restore my marriage."

And here me clearly. There is nothing wrong with asking Jesus these questions. But also let me be clear that Jesus might not answer the question in the way we expect or want.

Jesus tells the disciples to wait together and they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. And Luke, the writer of Acts, says that when the disciples got back to Jerusalem, "they were all together constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (1:12-14). Chapter two begins, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."

They were yearning for their lives and their world to be put back together in one way or another. They wanted some sort of restoration, and a plan of action, a technique. "Let's get it done. Let's get to work!" And Jesus tells them to go wait.

Waiting is always difficult. Especially for a smart, activist church. Especially for overachievers. Especially for “get-er-done” folks.

My friend Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is a young, white, writer and theologian who lives in a predominantly black part of Durham, NC. He knows about as much about racism and white privilege as much as any white person I know. Jonathan writes that the question we often hear in an activist church: “If not now, when? If not me, who?” is a question white people love to ask.

He’s very clear that he is not judging anyone else. He knows it is his own question. But it is a question that assumes white folks know what the right thing to do is, and it assumes it is something we can do something about. Furthermore, it assumes we have the time and money to do it. And it assumes that if we work long enough or hard enough we can make a difference. Jonathan says these are white assumptions.

People without power and privilege do not ask the question, “If not me, who? If not now, when?” Or at least they do not answer it the same way people with power and privilege do.

Waiting is about patiently giving up control and giving up our assumptions. So much anger in our lives and in our country is about old white guys losing control or the prospect of relinquishing power or the fear that our country is losing greatness. Everything from being stuck in traffic to changes in who and how our nation’s history is told to learning who benefits from the way the system works.

One of the ways our perspective changes, a step to changing the way we see is learning to patiently wait and give up assumptions of power and control. This is why the non-violent love of Jesus is so central. Because violence is the ultimate act of impatience. Violence says we cannot wait any longer, and we will force the issue, we want a resolution to the problem immediately.

Now waiting for women and for persons of color might mean something different. It might mean learning to tell your story, clearly and without intimidation. It might mean that white guys like me have to learn to shut up and women and people of color might have to learn speak up and not allow white guys like me to edit your story.

Waiting patiently and learning to give up assumptions, also means that we learn to be open to being constantly changed. Following Jesus Christ is a lifelong endeavor. We do not get to the point where we no longer need to be changed into who God is calling us to be. It takes our whole life. And change is not always easy and it is often not without risk and pain. Discovering that our beloved way of seeing the world is not Jesus' way of seeing the world is hard. Learning to see through the eyes of those without power or privilege can be painful.

Change is not on a smooth upward curve. It comes in fits and starts. Learning to wait patiently might sometimes mean that our faith gets weak or thin and we go through times when we don't know what we believe anymore or if we believe anymore.

But we don't give up. Waiting in the Bible and here in Acts is very closely akin to perseverance and tenacity. Most everyone goes through significant times of

doubt or anger or just plain despair. “Jesus, we thought you were going to restore Israel and you didn’t.” or “Jesus, I prayed and prayed for my loved one to be healed and you didn’t heal her.” Or “I’ve prayed and worked for justice, for peace and the children keep getting killed and the children keep dying from hunger. So Jesus, I’m tired of the whole thing.”

But the challenge and call of Jesus is we learn to wait tenaciously. Sometimes waiting is a fight, a struggle. We argue with God. We shout and shake our fist at God and we pray in sweat and blood. It hurts but we learn to stay in the crucible and not bail out. We learn to lament and cry and grieve. We learn to sing the blues and the old spirituals. Those of us who are white and privileged learn in waiting that some things might not be changed. The cancer might not go away. We learn that some things are tragic.

All of this is why we remember that Jesus tells us to wait together. We don’t wait isolated from one another. We can’t struggle through the tragedy by ourselves. We wait and struggle and grieve and pray together. It might be here in church on Sunday morning as we sing and pray together or it might be over a cup of coffee with one or two others we trust and love and know they trust and love us. But we learn to wait in community, together.

It takes prayer and the studying of scripture together to get to know Jesus, and without this prayerful conversation, dialogue, arguing, and listening to another, Jesus can easily become just one more abstraction, and the church becomes only what we read about on social media or what we hear from the latest ludicrous thing said by some preacher on TV.

The key to perseverance and tenacity in waiting is that we are together, supporting one another and praying for one another. Together we sing and cry. Going off by our individual selves to figure out what we believe or do not believe tends to be a white thing. The black tradition is that we sing, shout, cry, and struggle together. We hold onto each other and we do not let go.

The whole story of the Book of Acts is the young church learning to include more and more diverse and different kinds of people. It was hard. It was a constant challenge to change. But the church knew this was the work of God and they hung in there with one another.

Waiting is not passive. It is not resignation. We sing and pray and talk and listen in the Lord. God is part of the conversation when we're together. God is a factor. God is THE factor. And we're reminded that just because we do not think nothing is being done, does not mean nothing is being done. God is at work. So we wait on the Lord. We wait on the Holy Spirit. Because we've learned that what we're about to do is bigger than we are.

What is in front of us cannot be accomplished by our strength alone. No matter how smart we are or how hard we work or how long we work, we cannot do it. We need the strength of the Lord. And so we wait. We pray.

The outer work is done in community. Where we talk and listen and learn to see differently. I learn that my way of seeing is different from my sister's and my brother's and I begin to see another way. Then prayer is the inner work that we do together. Praying together and praying for each other. The work of seeing differently and changing cannot be done without the work of prayer.

Prayer is a kind of decolonizing the soul. Our souls have been deeply colonized so we think that old Pharaoh is right. We believe what he's told us all of our lives and the lives of generations before us. We believe that Pharaoh's Egypt is the way it is supposed to be: that his definition of god is the only definition; we believe that some are meant to be high up on the pyramid and some are meant to be low down on the bottom in the brickyards. We've heard and seen it and experienced it for so long, that we believe it in our souls. The Exodus story in the Bible is how the people got out of Pharaoh's Egypt but it is also how Pharaoh's Egypt got out of the people's souls. That's the work of prayer. It is the work of God in our hearts and souls and minds. And it takes time.

So together we immerse our lives in the Lord. Together we are reminded that we know and we have heard that "the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the Earth, does not faint and does not grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increases strength. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted. But they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:28-31).

They were all together in one place waiting. Suddenly there was the sound of rushing wind. The doors and windows flew open... Are we ready for this?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.