

While we wait: Working and Praying

Message for Sunday, May 8, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Acts 1:15-26; John 17:9-18

Children's Message:

Let's try a little game. Let's wait quietly for someone to giggle. Let's all be very serious and completely silent, and wait... (*probably won't have to wait for long!*)

Waiting is hard! Give me some examples of when you've had to wait for something:

- wait for my birthday
- wait in line
- "Wait until you're older."

When Jesus left the disciples to go back to heaven, he told them that he would come back to earth again some day; but he didn't say how soon it would be. We're still waiting today for Jesus to come back to earth a second time.

But while the disciples were waiting, they didn't just lie around! They spent a lot of time in prayer and worship. They continued Jesus' work of telling everyone the good news of God's love, of healing the sick, of caring for people in need, of helping people who treated unfairly.

Do you know what we call something that just sits around and waits and does nothing? *Various names.* I think of a jar of pickles.

Think of people in a jar of pickles! They're safe, they're kept in good condition. But they're not doing anything! I'd rather be an active Christian than a pickle Christian. I hope you do, too.

Message "While we wait: Working and Praying"

Acts 1:3-8, Today's English Version:

For forty days after his death he appeared to them many times in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive. They saw him, and he talked with them about the Kingdom of God. And when they came together, he gave them this order: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift I told you about, the gift my Father promised. John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

When the apostles met together with Jesus, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time give the Kingdom back to Israel?"

Jesus said to them, "The times and occasions are set by my Father's own authority, and it is not for you to know when they will be. But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After Easter, everything was different, yet everything was still the same. It was different in that the disciples were still trying to grasp the meaning of what they had witnessed — their teacher and leader who was dead coming back to life. After they had seen him several times over the few weeks that followed, there was no question at all about it. Even Thomas, who had been skeptical at first, now also believed, since he had been able to see Jesus in person, and talk with him. No one can be the same after being part of something like that.

It was different in that Jesus no longer went out in public, teaching about God's love, healing the sick, going on long trips into Galilee, playing with children and going to feasts with tax collectors and prostitutes. In fact they saw him only occasionally during those few weeks. They would be in a room, or out fishing, and suddenly he was there with them. He talked with them, reminding them of the things he had taught them. Then, just as suddenly, he would be gone again.

Yet things were still the same. They still had to sleep and eat. They still kept together as the group of Jesus' followers. It's human nature to want stability, to keep things familiar.

Then, just as they're reeling from the surprise of Easter, and trying to make sense of it all, Jesus leaves them for good. Other times he just disappeared. This time was different. He was saying good-bye. They watched him ascend into the sky. That's where theologians get the name for this event, "the Ascension."

Acts 1:9-11, New Living Translation:

It was not long after he said this that he was taken up into the sky while they were watching, and he disappeared into a cloud. As they were straining their eyes to see him, two white-robed men suddenly stood there among them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has

been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!"

And with that, Jesus was gone. They were now in the period of history which theologians call "the between time." It's the time between Jesus' departure and his second coming. We today are living in that same "between time."

But, what are we supposed to do now as we await his return? (*look at watch, yawn, straighten papers, brush lint off shirt*)

Some think that we should be keeping things straight. As we await Jesus' return we should keep the house clean and keep the church in good order. That's what Peter appears to be doing.

The number 12 was very important in their religious tradition. There were 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus had chosen 12 people to be his apostles. Since Judas was gone (he had committed suicide after he saw what happened to Jesus on Good Friday), Peter figured they needed to bring the number back up to 12.

Acts 1:21, New Living Translation:

"We must choose another man to take Judas's place."

Jesus had given clear instructions about waiting until they were filled with the Holy Spirit (which happened 10 days later, on the Day of Pentecost). But he hadn't said anything at all about replacing Judas. And we see later in the Acts of the Apostles that Jesus himself picked someone else entirely to be a new apostle: Saul, later to be called Paul.

I'm not saying that Peter and the other apostles were wrong or right in doing this. The Bible isn't at all clear on that matter. I'm just saying that it's easy to understand how they were thinking.

But what I really want to focus in on now is: what does Jesus want *us* to do now while we are waiting for his return? Did Jesus intend that we spend all our time maintaining the church and keeping things in smooth running order? Is that our top priority?

The last night that Jesus was with his disciples before the crucifixion, Jesus prayed for them:

John 17:9-11, Today's English Version:

"I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those you gave me, for they belong to you. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine; and my glory is shown through them. And now I am coming to you; I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Holy Father! Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one just as you and I are one."

Jesus prays for the Father to protect the disciples, to care for them. It would appear that Jesus wants them to stay preserved until he comes back.

Now if Jesus really wanted just to preserve us until his return, the best thing he could have done would be to put us in a vat full of vinegar and salt and dill, and pickle us. Then we could sit up on a shelf somewhere, perfectly preserved until we were needed again.

But it appears that isn't exactly what Jesus had in mind when he prayed for the Father to protect us. Jesus continued in that prayer with something that changes completely our understanding of what he desires:

John 17:15-18, New Living Translation:

"I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They are not part of this world any more than I am. Make them pure and holy by teaching them your words of truth. As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world."

Jesus was crucified for the work he did, preaching the good news, healing the sick, confronting injustice, correcting hypocrisy, loving the outcast, and so on. Now he is sending us out to do the same kind of work, and so he asks the Father for protection.

Our place in the world is not up on the pickle shelf, playing it safe. Jesus is sending us out into the world to continue his work, the work of his church, his Body. This is our mission. Simply maintaining order is not a mission.

There are two kinds of churches: maintenance minded churches and mission minded churches. A maintenance minded church thinks primarily of keeping things in order, of keeping the machinery

oiled and running. But a mission minded church thinks primarily of sharing and living the good news of the love of Jesus with a world which has so much bad news.

Now please don't misunderstand me; maintenance is important. But only as a means to carrying out the mission.

Jesus is calling us to carry on his work. Sometimes that might mean taking on some great task, like starting a ministry in Stirling where ex-convicts starting a new life can find help getting a job, find a place to live, find a community where they are accepted and loved. Sometimes that might mean small, simple things.

Tony Campolo, a Christian speaker, tells this story:

It was my privilege once to be on the same speaking docket as Nobel Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu. Before the service began, I was carrying on the small talk that people usually use to fill the time. Jokingly, I asked the bishop why he wasn't a Baptist. "After all," I said, "here in the United States most black people are either Baptist or Methodist." In a moving story, the bishop explained why he had become an Anglican priest.

He told me that in the days of apartheid, when a black person met a white person on the sidewalk, the black person was expected to step off the pavement into the gutter to allow the white person to pass, giving the white person this gesture of respect. "One day," the bishop told me, "when I was just a little boy, my mother and I were walking down the street when a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!"

The bishop said, "I was more than surprised at what had happened and I asked my mother, 'Why did that white man do that?' My mother explained, 'He's an Anglican priest. He's a man of God, that's why he did it.'"

"When she told me that he was an Anglican priest," said Bishop Tutu, "I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God."

See how even the smallest bit of kindness can make a difference in people's lives!

Next Steps:

- Pray for passion: to be excited about being a living message of God's love in our community.
- Pray for direction: "God, where can you use me? How? Who?"
- Pray for help: "Holy Spirit, fill me with your love, so that I can love others."
- Do it! Don't be a pickle.