



## *“Inside Out”*

Acts 17:22-31 and John 14:15-21

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The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Our two Lectionary readings today...from the Gospel of John...and from Acts....they couldn't be more different. They move in literally opposite directions.

The reading from John...which reaches more for our hearts...it intimately speaks to our inner faith...as followers of Christ. It's about our relationship with God...through Christ and the Holy Spirit...about our inward journey as Christians...in a sense...setting us apart in from the world.

On the other hand...our reading from Acts...which is much dryer...more head-oriented...it speaks to our relationship with the world...around us. It's about reaching out to help change the world...about the journey outward....placing us very much in the world.

And so...in each passage...we learn something different about the Christian journey...we see it from two perspectives....inside and out. Let's begin by looking inside.

This reading from John is part of a very long discourse by Jesus...often called his "farewell discourse"...since it comes just before his betrayal.

Jesus is speaking to the Disciples...but he might as well be speaking to us. It feels that intimate.

The Disciples were at a point where they needed to hear from Jesus...they needed to hear his reassurance. They'd seen how the religious authorities reacted to Jesus. And they had just heard him foretell his own suffering and death. There was much to fear.

Jesus starts with an instruction...telling them that the best way to love him is to be obedient...by following his commandments. Although he doesn't say it specifically...he must have especially meant the Great Commandment...which he had just given to them moments earlier.

Then Christ begins to make promises...beginning with his promise to deliver the Holy Spirit...or what he calls the "advocate"...and "the Spirit of truth"...to be with them "forever."

His promise seems intentionally mystical and mysterious...he doesn't really explain much about this Spirit...other than to say that it "abides with you...and in you."

And then he promises that he will shortly return...so that..."you will know that...I am in my Father, and you in me...and I in you."

What Jesus has done...is essentially say...that the Triune God...will not only be with his followers...but also in his followers.

Addressing what must have been their fear...the entire passage emphasizes...the need for an almost childlike dependence on God. Christ promises not to...leave them “orphaned.” This seems a wonderful metaphor for the way Christ wants us to view our relationship with God...a relationship of pure dependence.

This promise of being one...literally one...with the Triune God...with God in us...and us in God...it sounds almost magical. It reminds me of when Paul says that nothing...including death...can separate us from the love of God. Well, here...in John...we see what Paul meant.

I often describe my primary hope in ministry...as being to help bring others closer to God. This passage...with its remarkable intimacy...beautifully describes...the kind of relationship with God...that I hope...and pray...all of us...including myself...can have.

In this emphasis on our inner faith relationship with God...Jesus makes another point that...at first blush...might make us uncomfortable. Jesus makes a very clear distinction between his followers...and non-followers. He is drawing lines.

He says...the world “cannot receive the Holy Spirit”...because it “neither sees him nor knows him.” And he adds...“In a little while the world will no longer know me...but you will see me...”

To me...this sounds like an...“us vs. the world” mentality...and it seems kind of harsh.

And yet...thinking about what Jesus is saying here...it really is logical. If one doesn't choose to pursue their relationship with God through Jesus...of course that relationship won't be exactly like the one that Jesus is describing.

The overall impact of Jesus' words here...they support and build our own inner Christian faith...while also implicitly lifting up the idea that...Christians...need some separation from the world around us.

When we turn to Acts...we find literally...the polar opposite. While John lifts up the need for inner focus...and shows our separation from the world...Acts tells the story of early Christians entering the world...and trying to change it.

Here is Paul...in Athens...the great center of culture, academia and philosophy...trying to evangelize...an audience that prided itself on curiosity...an audience that knows little about Paul's faith...and that worships various idols.

Paul is continuing his prolific missionary journey in Asia Minor...often causing an uproar. But here...the reaction is different...more like curiosity...which isn't surprising in view of the intellectually driven nature of Athenians.

Athenians are apparently curious enough to send him to the Areopagus...which was a special court of highly respected leaders...where philosophical and other issues were discussed. This wasn't a trial...it was more like a debate...and debate was something that Paul seemed to deeply enjoy.

Now arguably Paul was one of the most successful...if not the most...successful...marketers of all time. Based on what we know from the Bible...especially from Acts...the spread of Christianity throughout large portions of the Roman Empire...was meaningfully...a result of Paul's efforts.

And this story reveals one of his marketing methods. In fact, we see here...what may well be the first rule of marketing 101: *Don't insult your audience.*

The first thing Paul does...in front of this council...he compliments them. He tells them how “extremely religious” Athenians are. He basically compliments them for being religious seekers.

Like the brilliant marketer that he is...he looks for an opening. And he finds that opening in their altar...“To an unknown god.” Paul proceeds to tell them about this unknown God...who is, of course...the God of our faith.

Paul presents the God who created the world and all in it...the Lord of heaven and earth...who gives all mortals life and breath. He presents a transcendent God...far different from the Greek’s...man-made idols.

The beauty of what he is doing here...is that he is using ideas that are very much in synch with aspects of Greek philosophy. Like any great salesperson...he is trying to make his pitch resonate...trying to put it in terms to which the Greeks can relate.

He says...“For in him we live and move and have our being’ as even some of your poets have said.” And yet...at the same time...he is challenging the validity of their idols...who derive from human hands...human imaginations. The question he seems to be posing is this, “how can the creator be made by the created?” It is very strong logic.

And then he gets to his punchline. Boiling it down...he says that in order to satisfy God...“all people everywhere” must repent.

It’s worth pausing for a moment on this idea of repentance. While we know that repentance is the act of contrition...we often forget that real repentance...also means change. It means turning away from what one was doing before.

And so we can see in Paul’s punchline...in the focus on repentance...that the real goal that Paul was pursuing...was to change the world around him...in this case...to change the Athenians. And...of course...the only way to change the world...is to go out into the world...to engage the world.

When we step back from our two passages...the contrast should be coming into focus...one reading concerned about our inner faith...and the other...implicitly lifting up the importance of the Church’s work out in the world. One looks inward...and the other looks outward.

Actually...knowing both John and Acts...these two areas of emphasis really shouldn’t be very surprising. The generally inward focus of the Gospel of John is captured in the fact...that it is often referred to as “the Gospel of Belief”.

And Acts...of course...is entirely about how the message of Christ was delivered to the world...in the earliest days of the faith.

But...to the point of this sermon...I think there is an important implication...in the fact that...these two opposite perspectives stand side-by-side in our Lectionary...as well as in the Bible more generally.

To start, it seems clear...that from the beginning of the faith...Christianity has had these two tendencies...these two impulses...both of which are validated in so many places in Scripture.

And so...maybe the point is...that both tendencies are central to our faith. And perhaps the follow-on point...is that...as individuals...and as the church...spiritual health is premised on balancing these two tendencies.

But when we reflect further on this...it really does make sense...both on a personal level and from a church perspective.

Most simplistically...in order for Christians...to change the world...we need to do our internal work first...so we can know what we believe...and have a vision for the type of change we want to instill.

It really is common sense. Inner faith underpins and instigates our action in the world. We can best change the world...when we have confidence in our own faith...and in ourselves?

Said differently, churches and individual members need to be fortified and strong...as a platform for doing the church's work...outside the church's walls.

Maybe this ideal of first building our faith...and then acting it out...maybe we could call this: living our faith...from the inside out...with the inside part...propelling the outside part.

And...in our passage from John...Jesus so beautifully tries to do exactly this...to first fortify the Disciples' faith and strengthen them...before sending them out as Apostles.

As many of the longer time members of Plymouth remember very well...and newer members have also heard about in our New Members classes...Plymouth had been in a period of decline...in the 80's and into the 90's.

But the church's turn-around...it really began...in a robust faith renewal. To paraphrase a piece that we hand out at New Members classes...at the beginnings of this turnaround...the church made a "fateful decision"...to become a Christ-centered church again.

One of the ways this was accomplished was by laser focusing...on the Great Commandment. The Great Commandment became the center of almost everything here at Plymouth.

Decisions were explicitly made...based on whether that decision...was consistent with loving God and our neighbors.

The Great Commandment became so deeply embedded in the fiber of Plymouth...part of our DNA.

And what was happening here...was so logical. The church was working on its inner faith...building our confidence as a congregation...preparing for...setting the platform for...the next chapter...in the long and wonderful history of this congregation.

We seemed to be almost directly heeding...the words we hear from Jesus today: "if you love me, you will keep my commandments." Plymouth was truly renewing its faith...preparing for the future.

We so often hear David say that...what we are seeking here at Plymouth is "Christian transformation"...developing and shaping each other...forming Christ inside us. He talked about this just a week ago. As he said...we are like stones...being washed and gradually reshaped.

But...to the point of what we are talking about today...we also...so often hear David articulate...what I think is a vital reason for seeking this transformation: so that we can go out and try to change...heal...our broken world.

What we are talking about here today...is the need for balance...between...on the one hand...personal or communal faith...and on the other hand...living out that faith.

This feels to me...so much like the balance that comes from the Great Commandment.

We are to love God...building our own relationship with God...building our faith. And then we are to love our neighbors as ourselves...reaching outside our personal walls...our church walls...seeking to help heal others...seeking to make an impact on the world.

Like most endeavors in life...balance leads to health. In our endeavor to lead the good Christian life...it too seems that...balance is precisely what is called for.

And apparently...the way to do this...is by living our faith...from the inside out. Amen.