

Sermon for A Celebration of Ministry

The Feast of the Ascension

May 21, 2017

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Acts 1:1-11 Psalm 93 Ephesians 1:15-23 Luke 24:44-53

In the Name of God,
whose power in us, can do infinitely more
than we can ask for or imagine. Amen

- Ephesians 3:20

When I was 5 years old, I learned how to ride a two-wheel bike at my Uncle Pete's house. He had a long driveway with a gentle slope so gravity could propel the bicycle without my needing to pedal. After falling down a few times, I learned how to keep my balance by steering with the handlebars.

In time I was able to coordinate the steering with the pedaling.

Many times I ran off course onto the lawn.

When I crashed into a parked car, Uncle Pete taught me how to backpedal in order to use my brakes!

Learning how to ride a bike was one exciting ride and mastering that skill gave me the freedom to go places I'd never been before.

During the Season of Easter we've heard how, for Peter, Thomas, Philip, Paul, and the disciples along the Emmaus road, resurrection life was an exciting and adventurous journey.

The trek had its stumbling blocks, poor decisions were made and other missteps were taken, but the disciples' experiences led to glorious acts done in the name of Christ.

I wonder, “Are we too, able to learn how to do new things or understand new concepts?

Are we willing to follow the Lord to unknown places?

Can we take chances and trust that God is at our side as we go forward?”

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Today’s Gospel lesson, and this morning’s selection from that Gospel’s sequel, The Book of Acts, were both written by Luke. They contain both instructions and assurances that Jesus gave to his disciples as he was about to ascend into heaven. Since we also are striving to be Jesus’ followers, disciples who are seeking to recognize and respond to our individual calls to ministry, these pronouncements are worth paying attention to.

Let’s take a look at these four affirmations to consider how we can respond to Jesus’ instructions.

The first pronouncement to consider is found in the Book of Acts.  
*You will be my witnesses.*

Every Sunday at St. Patrick’s, we give people an opportunity to come forward and give thanks for blessings we have received, special close moments with Christ we have experienced, and to share our concerns for people in need.

This is one way we can respond to Jesus’ direction to be witnesses. As our service concludes we are sent out with a dismissal that states, “Let us go forth to love and serve the Lord.”

Then, as we proceed with our weekday activities,

We strive to keep our ears open for more opportunities give witness by word and by actions, to our families, with our friends, and even for strangers we may encounter in our day-to-day lives.

Luke's Gospel gave us the second affirmation:

*He opened their minds to understand the scriptures.*

Each Sunday we read scripture selections and then we listen to sermons that interpret those readings and aim to inspire us to put our understanding into action.

Our book study group is presently reading the book

*Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today.*

The study group begins each session with prayer.

This affirms our belief that Jesus will open our minds and increase our understanding of God's word.

Many of us also use daily devotionals like *Forward Day by Day* and *D365* and magazines such as *Guideposts* to feed our minds and move our hearts.

When any of us intentionally and prayerfully seeks to gain a better understanding of Gods word, we find that, yes, just like those first apostles, our minds are being opened.

Also in Luke, we heard the third pronouncement:

*Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed.*

The word repentance means *turn around* or *get back on the right path.*

Getting off track, making unfortunate decisions, and needing an attitude adjustment are among the missteps that are part of being mere humans.

When we find ourselves in a slump or see our lives getting off course,

more often than not we need the support and encouragement of others. As “churchy” as the words *repentance* and *forgiveness* may sound, that is exactly what we’re doing when we help our friend get through tough times and struggles. When we lend a hand or provide a shoulder to lean on, we are responding, by words and actions, to Jesus’ command to proclaim repentance and forgiveness.

In the Acts selection, we heard the fourth affirmation. *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.* Just as others need us for support, because they can’t sustain the weight of their trials alone; in the same way we need the Holy Spirit to empower us to serve as faithful disciples. None of us can do this alone.

I believe that Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit, is what Luke was pointing to when he wrote that Jesus blessed the disciples as he ascended to the Father. A blessing I hear often hear people say is, “God be with you.” In the person of the Holy Spirit, God is with us. God’s Spirit is guiding us to serve as ministers in this world, and empowering us to be witnesses to the people we encounter in our lives.

As many of you know, I’m not the most avid sports fan. However I am a collector of good quotes. This one is from Vince Lombardi. *The measure of who we are, is what we do, with what we have.*

At the end of this morning's selection from the Book of Acts,  
two men in robes approached the disciples and asked,  
*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*

It's kind of like they're saying, "Why are you still here.  
What are you going to do with what you have?"

Then, wow, what they did with what they had!

They had ... a commission to help people turn their lives around,

They had ... The authority to forgive past offences,

They had ... their minds opened to God's word

and most importantly they were empowered by the Holy Spirit  
to carry out their sacred mission.

What they did, with what they had, was to spread the Gospel  
to all the corners of their world and beyond  
to places, that before, were beyond their wildest dreams.



Today we're taking time to celebrate the ministry of two gifted disciples,  
whose ministry has touched our lives in so many ways.

Next Sunday, Mike Marinco will serve as celebrant at St. Patrick's  
and Judy Marinco will be our deacon, one last time.

Mike and Judy have been part of our congregation for over 40 years.

Much of the spiritual growth that our parish members have experienced  
thru' those blest decades has been because of Judy and Mike's support,  
encouragement, example, love, and companionship.

Their roles in our parish were different in the 1970s than they were in the 90s.  
More changes happened and more growth took place on into the present.  
And God's not finished with them yet.  
Now the Spirit is leading them to a new place, to minister in new ways.

Their hearts are aching as they move from their home in Washington,  
and from their church home here in Madison Heights;  
much like our hearts are saddened, as we bid them a fond farewell.  
Mike and Judy's minds are racing as they adjust to life in Fenton,  
as they care for Mike's dad, Vince, and, I imagine,  
as they get more connected with the congregation at St. Jude's.  
In a similar way our minds are darting in many directions as we wonder  
how we at St. Patrick's will be able to move forward without our dear friends.



When our present Ministry Support Team was in formation  
(I think it was Mike Marinco who said it aloud first,  
but it was a thought that we all had in our minds.)  
“When are we going to be done?”  
In time, we came to understand that part of the answer was, “We already are.”  
With each thing we learned, with each skill we mastered,  
we were given the authority and the empowerment,  
to minister in ways that were new to us.  
The needs of St. Patrick's were being attended to and our parish became stronger.  
All of our members came to understand that they all had gifts,  
and they became more confident living into their own individual ministries.

The other part of the answer to Mike's question was this:

“We're never going to be done.”

As time goes on, we all recognize that there are classes we choose to take, workshops we want to attend, programs we decide to sponsor, and opportunities we seize, for knowledge, growth, and understanding.

+ At this year's Gathering of the Total Ministry teams, we had 14 of our members who came to learn more about the team formation process and how they can help support the ministries here at St. Patrick's.

+ This year, parish members attended Ministry Fair, to learn new things, to gain a greater understanding, or to hone some skills they already have.

We also had a member, Barb Marshall, who was a presenter.

She shared what we at St. Patrick's have learned and experienced with Total Ministry.

+ Our book study group has grown to 24 participants.

Each time we complete one book, we begin another.

+ From year to year we set new parish goals and sometimes we continue working on goals from the previous year.

Is change happening, yes-sir-ee. And thank goodness.

Because with no change, comes stagnation.

With change comes opportunity.



Already, some of our parishioners have accepted the invitation and have seized the opportunity, to continue the good work that Mike and Judy have done here. Here are a few examples:

Gloria Thompson is the contact person for the prayer quilt ministry.

Edith Faircloth and Linda Ferguson are coordinating the work of the altar guild.

Pam Baker is the point person for our acolytes.

These ministries, as well as, training Eucharistic visitors;

preparation for baptisms, confirmations, and weddings;

and so much of the important work that was led by Mike and Judy, will continue.

In time, as the Holy Spirit moves, like she did with Judy and Mike,

someone may feel a call to the diaconate or priesthood.

Others I'm sure will begin ministries that are totally new to St. Patrick's

and people will recognize that other aspects of their lives,

in their workplaces, and in their homes, are ministry too.

Mike, no one is going to distribute communion with a glowing smile like you do.

Judy, I suspect that none of us will be able to express love for the environment

and the reverence for the acts of planting and harvesting that you,

(our dear friend who grew up on an apple orchard) have modeled for us.

Although we will strive to continue the good work you have begun.

The two of you can never be replaced and you will not be forgotten.

Borrowing the words of encouragement

that we heard St. Paul give to the Ephesians this morning,

*we will not cease to give thanks for you, as we remember you in our prayers.*





As we all strive to be faithful disciples and humble leaders, let us pray.

Holy God, we confess that sometimes

we feel like the life of our dear parish is *in pieces*.

Send your Holy Spirit so we may go forward *in peace*.

Teach each of us what we need *to know*, so we may *serve you*.

Lead us to where we need *to go*, so we may *serve others*.

And give us the confidence that comes with having you by our side. Amen.

Sources:

*The New Interpreters Study Bible*, NRSV with Apocrypha, Abington Press, Nashville, 2003

*d365 Daily Devotional*, Tyler Spradling, April 23, 2017