

Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, May 17, 2015

“Being God Together”

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

John 17:6-19

Most of you will have gotten a letter from me this week letting you know that I am following a call to go back to school this fall, and moving to California. I will be with you through the beginning of August, and then I'm switching gears to return to full-time theological study. This is one of those momentous decisions that feels, to me, on par with choosing the twelfth apostle – although I guess it's not *quite* as significant for Christianity as a whole.

But certainly we as a church are in a transitional moment now, just as the disciples were in these two moments on the eve of Jesus' death, and on the eve of Pentecost. And what they model and pray for us in times like these is an attitude of prayer, and of unity in God.

We as a congregation are in a season of transition, not just of leadership but also of your own identity and focus. A generous monetary gift might be the springboard for some of this discernment and refocusing, but the questions we're asking in these times about who we are and what we value are bigger than simply deciding what to do with a chunk of money, even a very large one. In this changing cultural landscape, where churches simply don't take on the same role they have in previous decades, individual churches like ours are faced with something of an identity crisis, right along with the big-C Church as a whole.

This week the Pew Research Center released their 2014 religious landscape study, confirming what many of us had probably suspected: the numbers of people in the US identifying with any Christian faith have dropped sharply even since their previous study in 2007. Our world is changing, rapidly, and we are not sure what to do about it. We are anxious, we are confused, we are scared – because the world we knew has changed, and we're not quite sure how we're supposed to act in this new world.

I think the apostles, Jesus' closest friends, might know something about that.

In our reading from John, Jesus is about to be arrested and killed, and he is saying his long and drawn-out goodbyes around the dinner table. In the reading from Acts, Jesus has been resurrected and then ascended back to heaven and left them again. The disciples are a bit at loose ends because Jesus is gone and the Holy Spirit has not yet come with a hope for new things and a new mission to send them out with.

So they decide to have an election. Because that's productive, right? Or at least it's familiar.

Jesus came and shook up the world they knew – upset everything they had known and taught them a whole new way of existing in the world. And now he's gone again! So *now* what are we supposed to do?? Do we go back to the world we knew, before everything changed, and just try to hold on tight

while everything changes around us? Do we pretend the world hasn't changed, and just do what we've always done?

Or can we trust that the Holy Spirit is coming and will lead us into something new?

* * *

In the midst of all that uncertainty, the disciples gathered to pray. Which is a great start! But look at the contents of their prayer – instead of asking, “Okay, God, what next? What should we be doing now?” their prayer is shaped entirely by the assumptions that they're bringing. It becomes, “Okay God, we need to replace Judas as an apostle, and here are the criteria we've set out, and there are two of us who meet those criteria. Can you help us pick one of these two men?”

That's a very different sort of prayer. They were only listening for one very particular word from God, one predetermined direction, rather than being open to the possibility that God might lead them somewhere entirely new. And it's hard to say whether Matthias was the right choice for the twelfth apostle, because neither he nor Justus appear again anywhere in the scriptures.

I wonder if God cared as much as they did about filling that twelfth chair at the table. It's hard to say, because no one stopped to ask – or at least no one bothered to write that part down.

So as we start to consider our own transition, in leadership as well as in the bigger picture of what our mission might be in this new world, perhaps one lesson we might take from this text is the challenge to be open to new possibilities. Maybe the comfortable default answers used to be, okay, we'll hire a new full-time pastor and we'll stick all this money in the bank. And maybe that is what God wants for us in this moment amidst a rapidly-changing cultural landscape, and maybe it's not.

Our challenge is to recognize the times when God is leading us, and when it is we've already decided where we want to go and we're just tacking on God's name at the end like an ecclesial seal of approval. We've already seen over the past 3 years that the old familiar model of one full-time pastor is not the only one for this community. This model of shared leadership has been a great and life-giving one, and yet I think trying to run out and just find another young pastor to slot in to this Associate Pastor role is not necessarily the right answer either.

I'd suggest, instead, that what we need to do is to let the transition be uncomfortable and strange for a minute. And I don't just mean our particular leadership transition – I mean also the shift in culture around us and the change in our place in the world. Our world has changed, and will continue to change. Trying to deny that won't help, and trying to act in all the old familiar ways isn't going to work anymore. The world around us is just *different* than the world we once knew; as dramatically as the disciples' world was different before Jesus died and after.

Their world after Easter would never be the same again – and yet for them to long for the good old days when Jesus was alive would completely miss the point.

* * *

Our scriptures are full of stories of God defying humanity's expectations. We like sameness and familiarity, and yet God insists on changing things and making us new.

Jesus knew before he died that his disciples would be sent into a turmoil. And his prayer on their behalf is a prayer for their protection; he asks God, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." He does not ask for their comfort or their security, that they might have resources for the future, but he asks for God's protection and the people's unity.

And this, then, is our reassurance in the times of change and uncertainty: looking for God's presence with us, and being in relationship with one another as closely as Jesus is with his Father, our Creator. The promise is not that our lives will be easy or stable as followers of Christ – far from it. But our comfort and our challenge is being with God and truly *one* with each other. As close, as mysteriously one-yet-different as are the beings of God and Jesus, this is how Jesus prays we might relate to one another, all the believers and all those who might come to believe.

In this strange union, we know God as we know each other. We can seek God's will for us, and we come to know God better as we draw closer together in Jesus. Our way forward is always in God, and somehow we find God in our being together.

Friends, in all the change and excitement and anxiety that the next year or so will hold for us, however the particular faces change, let us be together in God, in prayer, and in fellowship with one another. Because in that we will know God.

Amen.