

Ministry “In-Between”
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Seventh Sunday of Easter, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A
May 4, 2008

We all have those in-between times, those transition times, in our lives: from the old job to the new job, the former house to the new one, the summer between moving from elementary school to middle school, or middle school to high school, etc. But sometimes the beginning and ending lines of transition get blurred, especially when one is undergoing a change that affects one’s identity—such as growing into parenthood, or losing a loved one to a terminal illness. When did the grieving really start—at death or before? Who am I now that my loved one is gone? Deep within, we know that we are forever changed at a very foundational level—but we sometimes wish it wasn’t so. All change is loss, so it is said—and sometimes we just rather things stayed the same.

I’m sure the disciples felt that way too. After all, they had been through a lot of changes, and I can imagine that all their thoughts and emotions surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus were still being processed at the time of Jesus’ ascension. Like a too-short visit with a beloved friend or family member, they may have been feeling emotions akin to ‘wait, don’t go, we’re not ready, you just got here!’. And even though Jesus left them with the promise of the Holy Spirit’s imminent arrival to empower them for ministry, they probably had no idea of what to expect—or when to expect it. It likely made for an uneasy transition time for those now ‘left behind’.

It says in Acts that after the Ascension they gathered together in Jerusalem and devoted themselves to prayer. But what kind of prayer? Were their prayers ones of worship, praise and thanksgiving—or prayers of intercession and petition, asking for guidance, pleading for direction? While we would probably like to envision those chosen few being confident and

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faithful, there were most likely moments of anxiety and doubt. Doubt not necessarily in God or Jesus, but doubt surrounding themselves: how are they to witness? What would they say? How can I possibly do this? How will we know when the Spirit has come, and what the Spirit wants us to do?

Many of us probably wrestle the same questions—through our Baptism we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, yet we still struggle with exactly what we are supposed to do with that. We too pray for guidance, for discernment, for strength and courage. Even though we know from the stories and prayers that Spirit of God is present in and among us, we sometimes feel as if we are also in those in-between times, waiting for direction, a signal—a sign. We wait for the heavenly anvil to drop on the head, we wait for the divine road map to ‘what you are to do with your life.’ And wait, and wait—oftentimes forgetting that God works in many smaller and quieter ways. And while we wait, we live out our lives as faithfully as we can.

And then perhaps one day it hits us—our ministry is in the now, not just in or after the ‘big’ moment. Each act of kindness or hospitality, every time you offer a sincere listening ear or open heart to someone in pain, every prayer offered up, joyful moment celebrated, tear shared—all of these are the many quiet and small ways of God that we often miss in the ‘waiting’ time. We keep thinking that a call from God means doing something ‘important’—and indeed it does. But God’s idea of importance is different from ours—for to God, each prayer is precious, each tear is cherished, every act of kindness is an occasion of celebration. Ministry, as a seminary professor

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used to tell us, is in the interruptions of life—not necessarily in the pre-planned services or events. Ministry is all about the in-between times.

The disciples came to know this well. You see, they not only lived through the in-between time between death and resurrection, and then Ascension until Pentecost, but also beyond—waiting for the second coming that did not appear as quickly as they thought. Their message did not fade; the church continued to grow; but Paul in particular needed to remind people such as those in Thessalonica that ministry is in the now, their lives as Christians are meant to be lived out now, and not just to sit around and wait for the second coming. He encouraged them to continue to live their lives and ‘do not weary in doing what is right.’ Stand firm, be steadfast, continue to do the work that you have been given to do—all these things and more were preached by Paul, and Peter, and other early church fathers. We still hear them today, still are called to minister in the in-between time.

But we cannot minister alone—for indeed, the very word of ministry implies more than one—it speaks of relationship. Jesus knew this, and spoke not only of his relationship with the Father, but also of his relationship with his disciples, and their relationship with him and the Father—and their relationship with each other. Jesus asks that his disciples—then and now—be one as he and the Father are one. One—of one will, one heart, one being. Not to cease being the different people we are, but to remember that it is not our will that we are to seek—it is God’s. We are made with our own likes and dislikes—but we are to hold onto the fact that we are to act in love with one another. We are not to be carbon copies of one another, but to live as we are called to

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live, following in the way of Christ. In that way, we may be one—one in unity with and through Christ.

But unity often gets confused with uniformity, and indeed, that is the dilemma of the world—and I daresay, the Anglican Communion--today. The word *unity* indicates solidarity, attention to the other, of deeply sharing one’s life with another—and a grounding of our relationship in something or someone outside of our own selves—Christ. *Uniformity*, though, is more concerned with sameness, right vs. wrong, a grounding of relationship in that which is in ourselves. Its cornerstone is fear—fear of the other, fear of change. And such a cornerstone is not strong enough to support the hard work of reconciliation and love that we are called to do. Only a cornerstone named Jesus Christ, one forged in love and service and sacrifice, is strong enough to do that.

So, come, let us be building blocks of the Kingdom of God upon that cornerstone, ministering to one another and a fractured world in a way that reflects that love we are called to share. And let us be strong, joined together in unity through the gift of the Holy Spirit—no matter how long our ‘in-between’ time is.

Amen.