

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36, Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11

As many of you know I am a retired educator. Today's lessons describe something most every teacher, my self included has experienced. You prepare and teach a lesson about a particular topic and you finish only to discover that no one gets it. Not one student understands what you worked so hard to teach.

In the lesson from Acts we hear of a group of people who had a remarkable teacher. Among other attributes he was an amazing story teller. He spoke often of the coming of a kingdom that would be diametrically opposed to the one his followers were living in.

This teacher of theirs filled their heads with stories of a reversal of fortunes and they pictured a kingdom where Jesus would overthrow those in power and hand them the keys to the kingdom. They have followed him across countless miles, and witnessed his brutal death and his glorious resurrection and now they think they understand. So they ask him, "is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" But instead of the answer they are hoping for he tells them "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth" and then he is lifted up into a cloud and disappears. I imagine most of us would have a similar reaction as those 11 disciples - we would stand there, looking up, mouths gaping open not quite believing our eyes.

This ascension created a question or two for those who followed Jesus, just as it continues to for us, his present day disciples. What exactly is this kingdom Jesus described? Baptist minister Randle Mixon tells us "this coming reign of God will be characterized by love and its cousins, compassion and justice, not by power and privilege, wealth or might."¹

In John's gospel we have another example of a lesson seeming to be one thing, but in truth it is altogether another. We are told that Jesus has the ability to grant eternal life. Most would interpret that as meaning people would never experience death, but the author goes on to explain "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.... that they may be one as we are one."

As I read these two lessons this week, two thoughts kept running through my mind: First, that we are a long way from a kingdom where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And second that Jesus has told us how we are to get there - by loving God and each other.

According to John's gospel God is in us and we are in God. I have a much easier time thinking God is in Jesus, than God is in me! After all, I am nothing like Jesus - I am a

sinner, I am flawed. Sure, I have moments of grace, but they are interspersed between conceit , hurtfulness, and injustice.

I would like to share a bit of a commentary about this passage that for me was both clarifying and up-lifting.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Clader states: “Some ancient theologians who studied these very verses talked about Jesus’ oneness with the Father in terms that suggest movement - a kind of interweaving or even a dance among the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. …Perhaps the vision toward which we strive is …[found] in the common dance of faith.”²

I love that imagery! And it spoke to me especially because of a beloved gift I once received. Something that personifies this idea of the common dance of faith. It is a sculpture by John Gurdon Brewster.³

The sculpture is of Jesus and Buddha dancing on a lotus flower. Upon close inspection both men have such joyful expressions that you almost feel their wild abandon as they twirl together, each holding the hand of the other. To me it captured so much of what I believe about faith. God is joy, God is love, God is present in both of those figures, as much as God is present in each of us. As I ponder this idea that I am dancing with the trinity I envision us as an ensemble moving together, sometimes forward, sometimes back, but always hand in hand.

Jesus assures us that we will be given power through the Holy Spirit and they we are to be his witnesses throughout the world. For some time now, God has been urging me to use my voice against oppression.

This past fall a small group of St. James’ parishioners began a journey together to participate in transformational conversation about race called Sacred Ground Dialogue Series.

We have been invited to explore how people of color have been harmed by racism, and how white people have been hurt in other ways, creating a shared - albeit deeply unequal - brokenness that compels us to overcome these legacies in deliberate partnership. The hope is that we will together step closer to the dream of beloved community. The kingdom of God Jesus announced in today’s Gospel.

For me, this dialogue has been both informative and sacred. Our work together uses a metaphor similar to dancing, that of walking a labyrinth. We walk in one direction, then circle back to look at our history and lament our past sins, both known and unknown until

now. I feel God guiding me toward that sacred center where the kingdom exists and we all see each other as one, then with God's help, we head out of the center, circling back to be re-infused with God's loving grace, and bring the kingdom to all.

There can be no misunderstanding that the lesson Jesus taught us is love.

I would like to close with a meditation by Ricard Wagamese, an Ojibway from the Wabaseemoong First Nation in Canada.

It is love itself that brings us all together. This human family we are part of, this singular voice that is the accumulation of all voices raised together in praise of all Creation, this one heartbeat, this one drum, this one immaculate love that put us here together so that we could learn its primary teaching - that love is the energy of Creation, that it takes love to create love.⁴ Amen.

¹ The Rev. Randle R. (Rick) Mixon , Pastor, First Baptist Church, Palo Alto, California. Feasting on the Word Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, volume 2 by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor

² The Rev. Dr. Linda Lee Clader, Professor Emerita of Homiletics, church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California. Feasting on the Word Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, volume 2 by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor

³ The Rev. Dr. John Gurdon Brewster

⁴ Richard Wagamese. Embers One Ojibway's Meditations. p46