

7th Sunday of Easter (Ascension Sunday)

Sermon 5.8.16

Scripture: Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

I've been stewing on this for a while—a clergy gathering in South Hadley a few weeks ago. It was the Western Massachusetts Day of Covenant, which the conference staff hosts and moderates. The opening worship was to anchor the day. Its theme was “Laying Your Burdens Down.” Each of us around the circle was invited to come forward, name a burden we're bearing, and lay down a small rock that was to symbolize the burden.

It wasn't quite an *open* invitation. Everyone was doing it, so not doing it would have felt a little hostile.

The problem was that I don't feel myself to be carrying any burdens. Certainly I'm busy and I work a lot. Often I'm frustrated and I go to bed every night tired. But neither work and service, nor home, nor hobbies are over-burdened or over-burdening. If anything, they lift me, they strengthen me. You, you all, and perhaps we all: we together uplift and strengthen. (I hope that's true for you as for me.)

The problem was also that it took a long time to make it around that circle, over an hour. So, much of the morning was spent listening to people list their burdens, and it was depressing. No, it was dispiriting.

I love the United Church of Christ. I've always been a member of a UCC congregation, and I imagine I always will be. But we in the UCC flirt with what's known as functional atheism, and it's tiresome to me.

Parker Palmer came up with the term. Author, educator, activist, Friend (which is to say Quaker), Parker Palmer speaks of functional atheism as “the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.”

Mary Luti speaks of this phenomenon in preaching, but she calls it something else: moralism. Once a Catholic nun, she converted to Protestantism, and more specifically Congregationalism, in her adulthood, and now she's something of a rock star in the UCC—and deservedly so. She's served as pastor of First Church, Cambridge, and Wellesley Village Congregational Church; she's also been a professor at Andover Newton Theological School.

But more important than the things that make for an impressive resume: she's a powerful, joyful person.

In a podcast she recorded for the program "Preachers on Preaching," she characterized moralist preaching as operating in the "should-would" realm, reducing every gospel story, and perhaps every scriptural passage, to a "should" story, to a lesson from which we should learn how to behave. These are less taken as stories that speak to the world in which we live and the world that God intends for us, and are more lessons that have teaching points and even morals to the story.

Whence the preaching: it's all about driving home this said-lesson, and if you didn't manage to live up to the lesson last week, then you can try a little harder this week. The Christian life is really just about trying a little harder next time. Incremental improvements: this is what we should hope for, strive for.

She saw this almost without exception in her Catholic childhood: all preaching was reduced to moralism, particularly as regards personal, individual purity or honesty, for example. But she sees it all over the Protestant side of the church, as well. "As I survey the preaching scene," she says, "moralism has taken hold of us and I find troubling...[In fact] it's pretty much all I hear these days...[and] I can't bear it anymore. I really can't."

Of course, in the UCC we're concerned less with personal piety and uprightness, and more with social justice and doing the work of the gospel in the world. But the affect of "should" preaching when it comes to social justice is very much the same. "It implies a kind of judgment on you," she says, and speaking more personally she explains its effect on her, "I feel disconnected from others. It leaves me no place to stand."

Most importantly, she suspects she's not alone. Telling of one congregation where she consulted and where the senior pastor preached exclusively from such a framework, she remembers an old man, a regular church-goer, who was that morning sitting behind her. Following the sermon, he said to his neighbor in the pew, "By this point, I pretty much know what God wants me to do. Now I'd like to know the God who wants me to do it."

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, was no stranger to would-should preaching. This letter is concerned almost exclusively with how the people in Ephesus should behave. Of course, we're no longer so certain that Paul wrote this letter. It might have come later than Paul's letters did. Plus, we're no longer certain that it was written to a congregation in

Ephesus—because the earliest manuscripts don't include the words, "in Ephesus," in the greeting. No, the earliest manuscripts open thus: "...to the saints, the faithful in Jesus Christ..." Whatever. Inauthentic though it may be, it's authoritative because of its main concern that the church be the body of Christ and thus should behave accordingly—and that preaches, as we say in my business. Often truth is proven true not by who's witnessing to it but by the thing itself—whether it *rings* true, whether it stands the test of time, whether it preaches.

Well, a lot of this "letter" rings true, has stood the test of time; a lot of it preaches. In the fourth chapter, it's written, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." In the fifth chapter: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Actually, the bulk of this missive, from the fourth through the sixth chapter, is an offering of practical advice on how to live holy, pure, and Christ-inspired lives.

But that's not to say it's mere moralism, and it's certainly not to say it peddles in functional atheism. No, for what spurs this whole self-understanding of the church—that it is the body of Christ—is the mysterious, already-true fact of us having "obtained an inheritance" and so being "destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, having set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory."

Yes, the larger context of right living, according to this letter first found Ephesus, is the in-dwelling and abiding fact of God who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places; who has, with all wisdom and insight, made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

In sum, with whatever excellence we might function in life, it's far from atheistic. On the contrary, it is very much of God.

Ascension Day is a strange feast day for the Church. It's not much celebrated these days, and maybe for its remembering an event that's outside the range of most people's experience—Jesus being carried up into heaven, disappearing into a cloud that "took him out

of their sight.” But a lot of the church’s feast days honor something out of this world, something few people have lived experience of. I suspect, then, that it’s not much remembered for its seeming to celebrate something few would want to celebrate—being left, being left behind.

This is the day when Jesus is remembered to have withdrawn from the disciples—all his friends—to be carried up into heaven. In the book, *Acts of the Apostles*, this event is even punctuated by two men, appearing and dressed in white robes, asking Jesus’ friends who were watching the sky, “Why do you stand looking up at heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go...”

The last chapter of this same writer’s first book, the *Gospel according to Luke*, doesn’t make the point so obvious—that this Jesus has been taken from you. But it’s there to be seen—that Jesus was here and now is gone, for a second time and indeed for a final time. He was here, and then gone (in his life and then his death). He was here again, in his resurrection; but now he was gone, and for good.

As far as things to celebrate, this falls low on the list—unless you move past the event and begin exploring the implications.

Thomas Long writes in his book, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, that the mainline church has given up on the eschaton, and this is a self-imposed impoverishment that we hardly recognize but has real affect.

The eschaton is the end of all things, God’s gracious and glorious end that is also a radical new beginning of a whole creation made new—where death is no more, where mourning and crying and pain are no more, where the pall that is cast over all the people is lifted and God’s grace and glory are the all in all. This is the vision and promise of the prophet Isaiah and the prisoner John on Patmos, this is the life and aim of Jesus crucified and raised, and it is good news for all. Yet it’s most frequently resigned to the realm of doomsday prophets on their street corners and late-night television shows. We mainliners, I mean: we of the mainline church don’t want to sound kooky.

So, we’ve let it but go.

But this then leads us into functional atheism and moralistic preaching, or, as Long calls it, “progress preaching.” Contrasting the two, he explains: “Progress preaching tells people to gird up their loins and use the resources at hand to make the world a better place”

while “Eschatological preaching brings the finished work of God to bear on an unfinished world, summoning it to completion...It is to speak from the end into the middle, to allow the word [which Jesus spoke from the cross], ‘It is finished,’ to liberate a world still very much in the making....[It is to allow] the eschatological affirmations that ‘Christ is risen’ and ‘Jesus is Lord!’ to exercise tension upon the present tense, generating both judgment and promise, creating the possibility of ethical action in the world sustained by hope.”

Really, eschatological preaching is to view the unfolding of history and our participation in it much as Tom (not Long but Savage, *our* Tom) recalled in his having seen that movie. It was a good movie, he told us a few weeks ago in the Homily of the People; it was subtle, well written and acted, well told. But that subtly and high quality is something he only really recognized when it was finished and he looked back on it and saw its true shape. All those dots of event-leading to-event and response-spurring-response, all those suddenly made sense when viewed from the end.

That’s what the eschaton does for history. That’s what eschatological preaching does for the people of God. That’s what the mainline church forfeits when it resigns itself to living in the moment and trying our hardest and doing our best. And that’s what Thomas Long, and Mary Luti, and Palker Palmer, and as it happens I, would like to hear proclaimed from our pulpits and sung from our sanctuaries—not “Try a little harder,” and, “Do a little better,” but that God is at work in all things for good and we are welcome to join in that effort, encouraged and even needed to join in that effort, though the effort will meet its proper end whether or not we do well and act right.

Not un-related: I got in a Facebook discussion last week in response to a couple articles written about the presidential race. Down to three candidates, the race as it is now had the two writers of these two articles critical of candidates present and past who’d lacked an animating idea or overarching reason for running for president, who were mere politicians waiting their turn at the presidency. That’s so twenty years ago, was the glib assessment. We’re in a different time, wherein we need not policy-tinkering but grand envisioning, and we need not seasoned politicians but radical reconfiguration.

Where I weighed in was from my suspicion of the assumption that our politicians should be grand visionaries rather than policy-makers who don’t mind getting specific and tinkering with details. Really, I’m troubled at the idea that thinking in terms of actual public

policy is grounds for criticizing people running for public office. After all, I'm not in need of a savior. I've already got one of those. I just want capable, responsible people to govern, to decide how to allocate resources in such a way as enriches all society as best as can be done—and if not perfectly today, then there's always tomorrow, to stay on task, to stay on task.

It's funny when irreligious people assume religious people are unreasonable—as if religion casts out reason and reason returns the favor. It's funny to me because my religious practice is what makes me able to operate reasonably at all.

Similarly, it's dispiriting to me, and moreover disquieting, when preachers proclaim from their pulpits, in essence, "Let's be reasonable," because, along with this being "enervating," as Mary Luti puts it, it seems to me to open a way for demagogues in the public square. We want to be inspired. We need to be lifted up. We'll look in all directions for someone to do that for us—and if it's not happening in our houses of worship in regard to what's true and good and abiding then we'll seek it out in places where such "inspiration" can turn cynical and even evil.

At that same clergy gathering, there was much conversation around congregations that aren't *doing* what they'd said at the outset they wanted to do. Their pastors are getting frustrated; their pastors are getting bored. These congregations had said, via their search committees, that they'd wanted to *do* this and to *do* that. And time was passing—a year hence, two years hence, and not much was *doing*.

I always feel slightly indicted by these conversation. Nearly fifteen years I've been here, in this tiny congregation in this tiny town: either I lack ambition or intelligence or faithfulness—and perhaps we *all* do, all thirty of us.

But here's the thing: I think we're *doing* something here. I think something is *happening* here, even while we sit together yet again for another Sunday morning. I think something *happens* when we pass the peace—peace is called forth. I think something *happens* when we pray for the Spirit of truth—the Spirit of truth visits and speaks. I think we're *doing* something when we rejoice with those whom we know to be rejoicing and we weep with those whom we know to be grieving.

So—if we also, then, decide to knit prayer shawls together or to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity together; if we also, then, decide to collect produce for the Pittsfield food pantry or can tabs for the Ronald McDonald House, all the better. But if humanity has

not been rid of homelessness in spite of our best efforts, then we're not to blame; and if the Elizabeth Freeman house is a short prayer shawl for a new resident though we've been steadily knitting such things, then we're not to blame. We keep our eyes on our aim, and we bless the labor of our hands and hearts to God's good purpose, and we hope.

We hope.

Spending an hour laying down burdens last month didn't make me feel less burdened. What likely *would* have is the question, "Where is the Holy Spirit active in your ministry, in your life, in your church, in your home? For this we know: God does not leave us orphans. Though Jesus has ascended, God instead has sent down a spirit of wisdom and revelation, which we obtain as an inheritance according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things." Therefore, we know that the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. The question then is simply, where?

Operating as if this probably isn't the case would be reasonable enough. But we're here in this place for something larger and truer and more reliable than reason. We're here for revelation, and inspiration, and salvation that is the wholeness and completion awaiting us all at the end. That Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father means that his saving work is done, that it summons us from the end, breaking into time as we live it, and enfolding into its coherence all that takes place.

Assured of such truth, we cast our ballot, then, for the one whom we trust to steer a more immediate course—giving to Caesar what is Caesar's, as it were—yet in the nearly weightless faith that God is at work in all things for good.

Thanks be to God.