

The Promise and the Task

Matthew 28:16-20

The evangelist Matthew does not describe the event of the Ascension of Jesus. Rather, as the celebrated text we have just heard shows, he gives us its meaning. This is what the ascension of Christ proclaims: the fullness of the divine authority has been given to the resurrected and ascended Son of God.

That is the promise: "All authority has been given to me ..." as Jesus told the gathered disciples in Galilee.

And this is the task: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The Ascension left the disciples, as it also leaves the church of all the ages, with nothing to rely on but the promise of God: the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the promise of God being with God's own, the promise of Christ coming again in a way that would be visible and glorious. With no more seeing and nothing to go on with but God's word, they were to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching as Jesus commissioned them.

As we look at the Ascension of Jesus, let this promise be at the center of our whole sense of the event and its meaning for us. The meaning of the ascension does not set Christ light years away from us. As Luther put it, "the right hand of God is everywhere ..." Believing Jesus Christ to be at God's right hand is believing the promise that Christ is present wherever Christ followers gather.

And so, the ascension of Christ is a truth that stands in line with all the revealed truth of God: it is ours in faith. We trust God's reliability altogether. Christ completed the redeeming work for the world and presents it to God as the capstone of our redemption. The ascension does not make us stargazers. It declares us forgiven by Christ and called to the task Christ has for the church.

We must learn with the disciples. Our learning from Christ cannot be selecting this truth but crossing another out. We really are not spectators. This is not the option for disciples.

The Ascension has taken place! And the result is the empowering Spirit of Christ upon us to cause us to lift up our heads to Christ. Christ is with us in words and with the water, the cup and bread. By way of them Christ is present and gives of Christ's self and Christ's gifts.

And there are still more tangible ways in which Christ is made known to us as the ascended one. By words and sacrament, we are made alive and energized. This life and energy are not just intended to spin us around and around inside ourselves. Christ is made known through us as we become Christ to our neighbors. Whatever we do for one another we have done for Christ. "I was hungry, and you gave me food." "When did we see you hungry?" "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." These words from the parable in Matthew 25 belong in our awareness.

The task Christ left us is enormous. Yet that is what Christ left us with.

We come together to celebrate Christ's Ascension as people who have found Christ reliable. Take hold of what Christ has left us. Christ has left us in our humanity lifted up to God's presence, no longer trapped in the downdraft of fate or the inevitability of defeat. We have Christ promise. We have Christ word. One we do not see, but we hear, and we see Christ love at work in the lives of those who follow Christ in faith. We are baptized. We come to Christ table. Christ comes through these means and that is what makes them powerful and alive forevermore.

Our fractured world is in desperate need for the uniting and reconciling love which triumphed in the ascension of Christ. The Ascension draws us to Christ, and to each other. Let no barrier keep you from others because of

external things such as skin color, economic standing, gender identity, sexual orientation, national difference, political preference, or age difference. Across the face of the earth there are congregations of baptized people who say yes to the ascension. We need to find each other and say yes to each other. Our hands must be joined because our hearts are united in Christ.

This can happen in ways that are of deep significance. Several years ago, I was part of a mission trip to Costa Rico. There we were in contact with fellow Christians, I experienced the power of Christ to hold people together when no other force will do it. We did not know each other beforehand. But with the arrangements in place that enabled us to get to know each other, it was remarkable how quickly the boundaries of language, class, etc. were crossed.

This is the most direct way I know of for Christians to bring the ascension power to bear in such a way as to heal the dangerous suspicions and alienations that keep us apart.

We do not see through the cloud that surrounded Christ at the ascension. Yet Christ is not on the other side of that cloud; Christ is on our side. Christ's words, promise, and task - as we enter into all these we know Christ's presence and share it with others. Christ enables and guides, fitting things together and blessing people. Christ exercises the loving power of God for us While sitting at God's right hand. In Christ love for us we are called to serve and to share Christ's love with the world.