

5.4.08 *From Jesus to Christ*

**1 Pet 4:12-14; 5:6-11** ☐☐ Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. ☐

☐ **John 17:1-11** ☐ After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

**Acts 1:6-14** ☐☐ So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of

Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Today is Ascension Sunday, though we in the UCC do not call it such. Our lectionary reading from Acts nevertheless reminds us of the experience of the early church in which Jesus was taken bodily up into heaven, whence he is expected to come again to "judge the quick and the dead," as the Apostles' Creed says. You may have noticed that for several weeks since Easter, we have had only New Testament readings; that's how important this transition time was and is for us today. If we look carefully at the writings from the book of Acts, the gospel of John and the first letter of Peter, we can see how much the early church was struggling to put into words the power and cosmic meaning of their experience of the Holy Spirit, their wonder at feeling elation, joy and confidence, rather than despair and abandonment at Jesus' death. What they found miraculous was that what they had experienced in the man Jesus whom they knew in the flesh was exactly what they continued to experience when he was no longer physically among them.

How could they account for this miracle? Indeed, their experience after Jesus was physically among them was even more amazing because they had an intuitive understanding of what Jesus' entire life, teachings and actions meant far more than they understood when he was physically with them. Their minds had been changed, opened up, the cosmic light bulb went on, and their hearts were transformed with an energy and power of love that was beyond their imagination or hope.

I believe that the story of the Ascension is the necessary piece required in order to formulate the dynamic of Jesus' ultimate return to usher in the sovereignty of God. How could he return to earth from heaven if he never ascended there? And why was it believed that he would return in the first place? Both the Ascension and the Second Coming, I would suggest, are the early church's response to their experience of the Holy Spirit: if Jesus is not dead in an absolute sense, then how are we to account for experiencing his love as present and active among us? We need to link the man we knew as Jesus the carpenter with God not just as past but as future, and the authority of our own experience is that this is a cosmic happening, not an accident of group dynamism (as Peter will point out next week during Pentecost). Therefore Jesus was from God, returned to God, and will come again as part of God's plan. Therefore Jesus is not just Jesus, born of Mary in Nazareth; he is Christ, the actualization of God's own self that transcends the boundaries of physical life and death. When we add the name Christ, we point to an infinite presence that was there at the foundations of creation, that was fully present in Jesus the man of Nazareth, and continues to draw us into the sphere of a world in which all people are one, and all people are one with God and God with them. In sum, to say Jesus Christ, is to say that all

people on earth are one, joined together as sons and daughters of the one Creator, and that we are in fact not separate from the divine being but we are in God and God is in us. This is what it means to affirm Jesus as the Christ.

Now this may seem like the abstract theory of theologians, but I see it more as the close scrutiny of a poem of the universe. To say Jesus is the Christ is to recite the essential poem of the universe. What is the purpose of living? Why is there death and suffering? How shall we live? Who am I? All the great universal questions of life and death are answered in this affirmation: Jesus Christ. This is what we celebrate when we say as we share the bread of communion, "The body of Christ". We do not say "The body of Jesus." We say, "The body of Christ." Why? Because we are pointing to the infinite dimension of God that we came to experience through the man Jesus...and in saying Christ, we are affirming our belief in the ultimate extension of the love known in Jesus into the entire cosmos, crossing boundaries of time and space, gender and nationality and race. The body of Christ is the body of every piece of reality, not separate from you and me. To say Christ is to realize that the love experienced by and in this man in the flesh is part and parcel of the reality of life itself, of being itself, it is the same stuff as the stars, the seas and the good earth.

This process is parallel to what happens when someone we deeply love, someone who has deeply loved us, dies and we realize they are in the wind and the rain, in the ocean's waves crashing on rocky shores, and in the whistling of pine trees and palms. The love with which we were loved, the love by which we love, is exactly the same as what keeps sun and stars and moon in motion.

***Death is the Ultimate Freedom:***

*An old Tibetan lama who seemed to be rejoicing as his death approached was asked whether he was happy because he was old and ready to die. He replied, "I feel like a child who is returning to his mother. All of my life has been a preparation for death. Preparing for death has given me my life. Now that I am about to die, I will finally open my mind to its true nature. Death itself is the ultimate freedom, if we are prepared. If out of fear we deny death's inevitability, how can we prepare for it?"*

anneal \uh-NEEL\ verb

\*1 : to make (as steel or glass) less brittle by heating and then cooling

2 : strengthen, toughen