

Easter 2
Acts 1.1-11¹

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

If I were a writer of comedy, this line would be it. After all the disciples have been through with Jesus, after he was killed and then the confusion about the empty tomb, and after they saw and touched his scarred hands and feet, after all the people that Jesus had touched Jesus and all the people that touched Jesus, and all the parables and teachings about the Kingdom of God...after all that...when the disciples ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” there’s a sense of comic relief, breaking the tension and intensity of the last 40 days. It’s really funny, this ridiculous question that exposes their utter failure to grasp what Jesus has been about.

But when we’re finished laughing...and we are laughing with the disciples, because in their telling of the story, they know how ridiculous their question was ...when we’re finished laughing, then we get quiet as the truth of the question settles on us. Their desire for a nation state runs deep. They’ve inherited the desire from their parents and community and from the generations before them. But it isn’t just a desire for the disciples or for ancient Israel, the nationalist desire runs deep within human beings. We long for the security of borders and boundaries. The desire to be a chosen people, a nation that God has chosen, a people that God desires, runs deep. We know it does because we hear this nationalistic desire all around us.

It’s instinctive to want to identify with a people, with *our* people. And with a place, *our* place. When we have a people and a place, *then* we belong. Then we’re secure. The threats of “other” peoples and nations can’t get to us when we’re in our safe, walled-in homes and

¹ Willie James Jennings commentary on Acts has sparked my imagination and shaped much of my thinking.

communities. And from this secure place we're sure that it is God who has blessed and chosen our people, our place.

It's important for us to identify with the disciples. It can be easy for us to laugh *at* them, shaking our heads at their inability to grasp the Kingdom of God. We, after all, we get it.

Except that we don't. At least, I don't.

The Kingdom of God is much more elusive...and much more touchable than we know. The Kingdom is something new, something utterly different than what is already in the world. It holds otherness and mystery; and paradoxically, it is here, now, to be *seen* and *touch*ed. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus have undone the bindings and borders of nations and empires. And when the Holy Spirit descends, the revolution² that is the Kingdom of God begins. And it is nothing short of revolution, a revolution that has been turning for thousands of years.

The Kingdom that Jesus gives his disciples to build is completely indifferent to the borders and boundaries and concerns of nationalism and identity. We see the sharp contrast between empire and God's Kingdom in Jesus' trial. The concerns of empire permeate the trial. From the question of, "Are you king?" to Pilate sending Jesus off to Herod (because Galileans are in Herod's jurisdiction), we see how nationalist thinking forms people and their actions. And Jesus, in the midst of it all, remains completely unconcerned and indifferent. Then and now. The power of the state, the power of politics, the power of empire's leaders, the power of cult and culture have *no* power over Jesus. In the presence of Jesus, the power of empire is absolutely powerless. And that, of course, cannot be tolerated. So he's executed.

Empire holds no authority over Jesus because Jesus is powered by the Holy Spirit of God, a Spirit of life and aliveness, a Spirit of love and grace and forgiveness, a Spirit of

² This is Jennings' naming.

resurrection and revolution. Jesus' deep desire is not nationalistic—Jesus' desire is for One God, the living God, Creator God who is eternally creating the heavens and earth, who is creating humanity into *one* people.

It is this Holy Spirit, Jesus tells the disciples, that will come upon them. And once the Spirit of God has settled on them, then they will be witnesses... in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

This is the revolution. But of course, Jesus has already been turning in it. And now, just before he ascends, he turns it over to the disciples to continue to build.

Nationalist desires are about borders and boundaries; it is about the identities of those who belong within those borders and those who don't. Nationalism is concerned with preserving and defending power and space and identity. But Jesus, who knew himself created in the image of One God, was concerned about the liberation and healing of people, of bodies, in any and all spaces. The territory of God's reign is the body, the body of humanity, the body of creation. The borders and boundaries of God's reign are love and grace and release. This is precisely what we see when we're watching Jesus. He's constantly reaching out, *touching* people, and people are reaching out, *touching* him. And with touch, in the body, the Kingdom is made visible.

The touch of God's Spirit is the touch of love and grace. It is a touch that liberates and heals, that restores life and raises up new life. It is a contagion of love, exquisite, divine love that spreads through touch, from one body to another. The Reign of God is unconcerned with borders and checkpoints of nations. It has no need to defend itself because it cannot be dominated by political power. Rather, the Spirit is the power of life itself, always waiting for the next life-giving touch, body to body, person to person, for the revolution to spread.

And this is Jesus' instruction, to spread the revolution to the ends of the earth. But it isn't just information they're spreading. That isn't what Jesus is telling the disciples to do. Jesus understands that when the disciples travel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, they are crossing national borders. They are going into new places, meet new peoples, encounter new identities and cultures. And as they cross each border, they are leaving behind the boundaries of nationalist desire that have formed them. By journeying from place to place and from people to people, they are giving themselves to touch and be touched. And in each place, with each person, the Reign of God is being built. And the revolution grows. The intimacy of love and identity and belonging that is shared in the Kingdom of God is an intimacy that cannot be matched by any belonging that comes from nationalism.

But the disciples aren't to go yet. They must first wait for the Spirit of God. This is a temptation, isn't it? Too often we're ready to go and deliver Jesus' message, without waiting for God's Spirit to cover us, to form us and transform us. And when we venture out on our own, we're likely to spread the thinking and imagination of nationalism. And rather than crossing borders into new places, we bring our place with us. And we are witnesses to our Western ways, witnesses to our Mennonite heritage and beliefs.

But when we are clothed by the Holy Spirit of love and life, *then* we have the capacity to be witnesses for Jesus. The Holy Spirit gives eyes to see as Jesus sees. Jesus isn't commissioning his disciples to pass out information—he's commissioning them to *be* witnesses. To be active participants in the Reign of God—telling the story of Jesus, re-presenting the story, opening spaces for new stories to be told and shared. Powered by the Holy Spirit of God, the disciples...and we...become the eyes and ears, the hands and feet of Jesus. The Reign of God is no longer contained in one body, but it is in many bodies. And

the revolution grows. The Kingdom is being built, from one person to the next, one identity to another. The intimacy of love and aliveness cannot be contained.

Jesus understood that as long as he was on earth and with his disciples, the Reign of God would be centered on him. Perhaps even contained by him, by time and space. So the ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit were necessary to make this new thing possible, for revolution to grow and spread, to become tangible and visible.

We'll mark the ascension in a few weeks, but I want to dwell on it now for a bit longer. We need the ascension as a part of the resurrection story. For one thing, the ascension of Jesus takes the Reign of God into the cosmos, into the heavens, into the farthest parts of creation. And, we need Jesus to ascend. We need him to be absent so that the Holy Spirit can be present and alive, stirring, creating, restoring, raising up life and aliveness in bodies and in creation.

So Jesus ascends. When he's been taken away by the cloud, the disciples stand there, staring up into the heavens. Jesus has just told them that they'll be his witnesses. He's told them he will no longer be here and now for them to see; rather, they will be the ones who will see. He told them they will journey from place to place, from people to people, *seeing*, listening, touching on behalf of Jesus. That's their charge. But as soon as Jesus is out of sight, they stay and stare into the heavens...not seeing on behalf of Jesus, but staring at the absence of Jesus.

And two men in white robes show up. Perhaps they're the same ones that showed up at the Garden on Easter morning? That time they asked, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" And now they ask, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" In other words, "Why are you doing the very thing Jesus told you not to do?!"

But of course that's our instinctive response...to look for life in tombs and to look toward heaven to see the Reign of God. Our instinct is to keep looking in the places where we've always looked. And Jesus' ascension is a very real loss for the disciples. Of course they're disoriented and unsure what to do next.

But because we have heard this story, we have the benefit of learning from it. The temptation for the disciples, and for us, is to remain with Jesus. To keep looking for him in heavens. But Jesus' commission to his disciples and to us is to wait for the Spirit of God, and then, and then we're to journey, to travel through checkpoints and across borders, *seeing*, hearing, smelling, touching, sharing the intimacy of God's love, building the Reign of God with those we encounter.

May we *be* Jesus' witnesses...crossing borders, entering into new spaces...touching...being touched...seeing as Jesus sees...being seen. May we turn in the revolution, building the Reign of God.